WORLDS BEYOND

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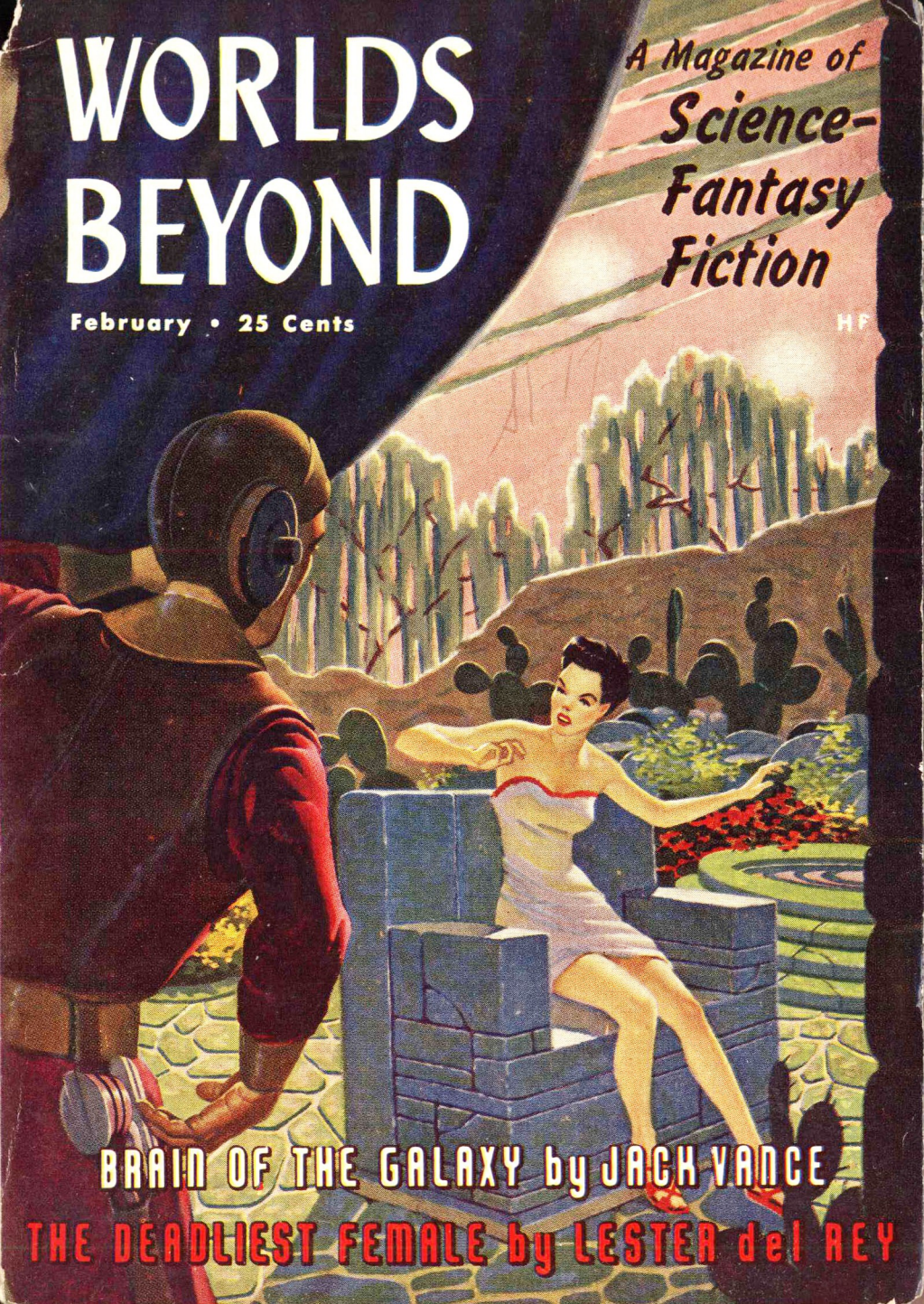

BRAIN OF THE GALAXY by JACK VANCE

THE DEADLIEST FEMALE by LESTER del REY

Contributors . . .

Jack Vance's reply to our request for personal information had not arrived by press time. Our loss is perceptible but not permanent; Vance has another story tentatively scheduled for our March issue.

Lester del Rey, like Sir Francis Bacon, has taken all knowledge for his province, and will cheerfully argue with anyone on any subject, quoting an overpowering number of authorities. He has been a sign painter, a counterman, an office manager and an itinerant evangelist, among other things. He has written a book on atomic energy which is to be published shortly.

H. B. Hickey writes, "I was thrown into the water and learned to swim. This is the true story of how I became a writer, back in 1945. Until then I had been in turn an infant, a child, a schoolboy, an amateur cowpoke, a semipro card player, a salesman and a husband. Rather than argue with my wife—who is too small for me to beat—I agreed to give up selling.

"Had I owned an automobile at the time I might have become a taxi driver. But as luck had it my sole mechanical possession was a typewriter. I wrote two detective shorts and sent them out. When they sold quickly I nailed up a shingle with my pseudonym on it and was in business. Since then I've written and sold a considerable amount of fiction of divers kinds, including a Western novel which has seen five editions.

"Now, at 34, I find myself in California, possessed of a large house, a wife (the same still), a small boy, a small dog and an automobile. Should literary disaster strike, I'm now equipped to be a taxi driver.

"I'm of average height, weight and appearance, undistinguishable from any other writer using the pseudonym of H. B. Hickey."

Poul Anderson is another writer whose self-description failed to arrive in time for this issue. Here again nothing is permanently lost—we have on hand a sequel to his *The Acolytes.*

Continued on inside back cover

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NOVELETTES

SHORT STORIES

DEPARTMENT

Cover by Van Dongen; illustrations by Harrison, Jannace and Napoli

DAMON KNIGHT, Editor

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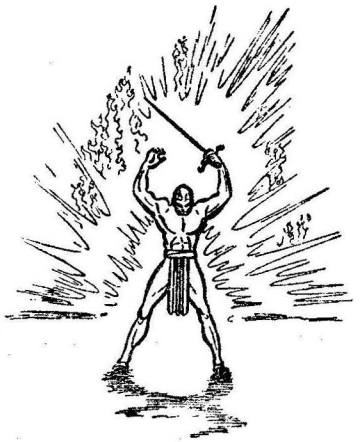

by Jack Vance

Brain of the Galaxy

It was the most brutal examination system ever devised — a system in which one wrong answer meant insanity, and another might mean death!

THERE was music, carnival lights, the slide of feet on waxed oak, perfume, muffled talk and laughter.

Arthur Caversham of 22nd-century Boston felt air along his skin, and discovered himself to be stark naked.

It was at Janice Paget's coming out party: three hundred guests in formal evening wear surrounded him.

For a moment he felt no emotion beyond vague bewilderment. His presence seemed the outcome of logical events, but his memory was fogged and he could find no definite anchor of certainty.

He stood a little apart from the rest of the stag line, facing the red and gold calliope where the orchestra sat. The buffet, the punch-bowl, the champagne wagons, tended by clowns, were to his right; to the left, through the open flap of the circus tent, lay the garden, now

lit by strings of colored lights, red, green, yellow, blue, and he caught a glimpse of a merry-go-round across the lawn.

Why was he here? There was no recollection, no sense of purpose. . . . The night was warm; he was not at all uncomfortable. The other young men in the full dress suits must feel rather sticky, he thought. . . . An idea tugged at a corner of his mind, nagged, teased. There was a significant aspect to the affair which he was overlooking. Refusing to surface, the idea lay like an irritant just below the level of his conscious mind.

He noticed that the young men nearby had moved away from him. He heard raucous chortles of amusement, astonished exclamations. A girl dancing past him saw him over the arm of her escort; she gave a startled squeak, jerked her eyes away, giggling and blushing.

Something was wrong. These young men and women were startled and amazed by his naked skin to the point of embarrassment. The submerged gnaw of urgency came closer to the surface. He must do something. Taboos felt with such intensity might not be violated without unpleasant consequences; such was his understanding. He was lacking garments; these he must obtain.

He looked about him, inspecting the young men who watched him with ribald delight, disgust or curiosity. To one of these latter he addressed himself.

"Where can I get some clothing?"

The young man shrugged. "Where did you leave it?"

Two heavy-set men in dark blue uniforms entered the tent; Arthur Caversham saw them from the corner of his eye, and his mind worked with desperate intensity.

This young man seemed typical of those around him. What sort of appeal would have meaning for him? Like any other human being, he could be moved to action if the right chord were struck.

By what method could he be moved?

Sympathy?

Threats?

The prospect of advantage or profit?

Caversham rejected all of these. By violating the taboo he had forfeited his claim to sympathy, a threat would excite derision, and he had no profit or advantage to offer. The stimulus must be more

devious. . . . He reflected that young men customarily banded together in secret societies. In the thousand cultures he had studied this was almost infallibly true. Long-houses, drug-cults, tongs, instruments of sexual initiation—whatever the name, the external aspects were near-identical: painful initiation, secret signs and passwords, uniformity of group conduct, obligation to service. If this young man were a member of such an association, he might react to an appeal to this group-spirit.

Arthur Caversham said, "I've been put in this taboo situation by the brotherhood; in the name of the brotherhood, find me some suitable garments."

The young man stared, taken aback. "Brotherhood? . . . You mean fraternity?" Enlightenment spread over his face. "Is this some kind of hell-week stunt?" He laughed. "If it is, they sure go all the way."

"Yes," said Arthur Caversham. "My fraternity."

The young man said, "This way then—and hurry, here comes the law. We'll take off under the tent. I'll lend you my topcoat till you make it back to your house."

The two uniformed men, pushing quietly through the dancers, were almost upon them. The young man lifted the flap of the tent, Arthur Caversham ducked under, his friend followed. Together they ran through the many-colored shadows to a little booth painted with gay red and white stripes near the entrance to the tent.

"You stay back, out of sight," said the young man. "I'll check out my coat."

"Fine," said Arthur Caversham.

The young man hesitated. "What's your house? Where do you go to school?"

Arthur Caversham desperately searched his mind for answer. A single fact reached the surface.

"I'm from Boston."

"Boston U.? Or M.I.T.? Or Harvard?"

"Harvard."

"Ah." The young man nodded. "I'm Washington and Lee myself. What's your house?"

"I'm not supposed to say."

"Oh," said the young man, puzzled but satisfied. "Well—just a minute. . . ."

Bearwald the Halforn halted, numb with despair and exhaustion. The remnants of his platoon sank to the ground around him, and they stared back to where the rim of the night flickered and glowed with fire. Many villages, many wood-gabled farmhouses had been given the torch, and the Brands from Mount Medallion reveled in human blood.

The pulse of a distant drum touched Bearwald's skin, a deep *thrumm-thrumm-thrumm,* almost inaudible. Much closer he heard a hoarse human cry of fright, then exultant killing-calls, not human. The Brands were tall, black, man-shaped but not men. They had eyes like lamps of red glass, bright white teeth, and tonight they seemed bent on slaughtering all the men of the world.

"Down," hissed Kanaw, his right arm-guard, and Bearwald crouched. Across the flaring sky marched a column of tall Brand warriors, rocking jauntily, without fear.

Bearwald said suddenly, "Men—we are thirteen. Fighting arm to arm with these monsters we are helpless. Tonight their total force is down from the mountain; the hive must be near-deserted. What can we lose if we undertake to burn the home-hive of the Brands? Only our lives, and what are these now?"

Kanaw said, "Our lives are nothing; let us be off at once."

"May our vengeance be great," said Broctan the left arm-guard. "May the home-hive of the Brands be white ashes this coming morn. . . ."

Mount Medallion loomed overhead; the oval hive lay in Pangborn Valley. At the mouth of the valley, Bearwald divided the platoon into two halves, and placed Kanaw in the van of the second. "We move silently twenty yards apart; thus if either party rouses a Brand, the other may attack from the rear and so kill the monster before the vale is roused. Do all understand?"

"We understand."

"Forward then, to the hive."

The valley reeked with an odor like sour leather. From the direction of the hive came a muffled clanging. The ground was soft,

covered with runner moss; careful feet made no sound. Crouching low, Bearwald could see the shapes of his men against the sky—here indigo with a violet rim. The angry glare of burning Echevasa lay down the slope to the south.

A sound. Bearwald hissed, and the columns froze. They waited. *Thud thud thud thud* came the steps—then a hoarse cry of rage and alarm.

"Kill, kill the beast!" yelled Bearwald.

The Brand swung his club like a scythe, lifting one man, carrying the body around with the after-swing. Bearwald leapt close, struck with his blade, slicing as he hewed; he felt the tendons part, smelled the hot gush of Brand blood.

The clanging had stopped now, and Brand cries carried across the night.

"Forward," panted Bearwald. "Out with your tinder, strike fire to the hive. Burn, burn, burn—"

Abandoning stealth he ran forward; ahead loomed the dark dome. Immature Brands came surging forth, squeaking and squalling, and with them came the genetrices—twenty-foot monsters crawling on hands and feet, grunting and snapping as they moved.

"Kill!" yelled Bearwald the Halforn. "Kill! Fire, fire, fire!"

He dashed to the hive, crouched, struck spark to tinder, puffed. The rag, soaked with saltpeter, flared; Bearwald fed it straw, thrust it against the hive. The reed-pulp and withe crackled.

He leapt up as a horde of young Brands darted at him. His blade rose and fell; they were cleft, no match for his frenzy. Creeping close came the great Brand genetrices, three of them, swollen of abdomen, exuding an odor vile to his nostrils.

"Out with the fire!" yelled the first. "Fire, out. The Great Mother is tombed within, she lies too fecund to move. . . . Fire, woe, destruction!" And they wailed, "Where are the mighty? Where are our warriors?"

Thrumm-thrumm-thrumm came the sound of skin-drums. Up the valley rolled the echo of hoarse Brand voices.

Bearwald stood back to the blaze. He darted forward, severed the head of a creeping genetrix, jumped back. . . . Where were his

men? "Kanaw!" he called. "Laida! Theyat! Gyorg! Broctan!"

He craned his neck, saw the flicker of fires. "Men! Kill the creeping mothers!" And leaping forward once more, he hacked and hewed, and another genetrix sighed and groaned and rolled flat.

The Brand voices changed to alarm; the triumphant drumming halted; the thud of footsteps came loud.

At Bearwald's back the hive burnt with a pleasant heat. Within came a shrill keening, a cry of vast pain.

In the leaping blaze he saw the charging Brand warriors. Their eyes glared like embers, their teeth shone like white sparks. They came forward, swinging their clubs, and Bearwald gripped his sword, too proud to flee.

After grounding his air-sled Ceistan sat a few minutes inspecting the dead city Therlatch: a wall of earthen brick a hundred feet high, a dusty portal, and a few crumbled roofs lifting above the battlements. Behind the city the desert spread across the near, middle and far distance to the hazy shapes of the Altilune Mountains at the horizon, pink in the light of the twin suns Mig and Pag.

Scouting from above he had seen no sign of life, nor had he expected any, after a thousand years of abandonment. Perhaps a few sand-crawlers wallowed in the heat of the ancient bazaar, perhaps a few leobars inhabited the crumbled masonry. Otherwise the streets would feel his presence with great surprise.

Jumping from the air-sled, Ceistan advanced toward the portal. He passed under, stood looking right and left with interest. In the parched air the brick buildings stood almost eternal. The wind smoothed and rounded all harsh angles; the glass had been cracked by the heat of day and chill of night; heaps of sand clogged the passageways.

Three streets led away from the portal and Ceistan could find nothing to choose between them. Each was dusty, narrow, and each twisted out of his line of vision after a hundred yards.

Ceistan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Somewhere in the city lay a brass-bound coffer, containing the Crown and Shield Parchment. This, according to tradition, set a precedent for the fief-holder's immunity from energy-tax. Glay, who was Ceistan's liege-lord, having

cited the parchment as justification for his delinquency, had been challenged to show validity. Now he lay in prison on charge of rebellion, and in the morning he would be nailed to the bottom of an air-sled and sent drifting into the west, unless Ceistan returned with the Parchment.

After a thousand years, there was small cause for optimism, thought Ceistan. However, the lord Glay was a fair man and he would leave no stone unturned. . . . If it existed, the chest presumably would lie in state, in the town's Legalic, or the Mosque, or in the Hall of Relicts, or possibly in the Sumptuar. He would search all of these, allowing two hours per building; the eight hours so used would see the end to the pink daylight.

At random he entered the street in the center and shortly came to a plaza at whose far end rose the Legalic, the Hall of Records and Decisions. At the façade Ceistan paused, for the interior was dim and gloomy. No sound came from the dusty void save the sigh and whisper of the dry wind. He entered.

The great hall was empty. The walls were illuminated with frescoes of red and blue, as bright as if painted yesterday. There were six to each wall, the top half displaying a criminal act and the bottom half the penalty.

Ceistan passed through the hall, into the chambers behind. He found but dust and the smell of dust. Into the crypts he ventured, and these were lit by oubliettes. There was much litter and rubble, but no brass coffer.

Up and out into the clean air he went, and strode across the plaza to the Mosque, where he entered under the massive architrave.

The Nunciator's Confirmatory lay wide and bare and clean, for the tesselated floor was swept by a powerful draft. A thousand apertures opened from the low ceiling, each communicating with a cell overhead; thus arranged so that the devout might seek counsel with the Nunciator as he passed below without disturbing their attitudes of supplication. In the center of the pavilion a disk of glass roofed a recess. Below was a coffer and in the coffer rested a brass-bound chest. Ceistan sprang down the steps in high hopes.

But the chest contained jewels—the tiara of the Old Queen, the chest vellopes of the Gonwand Corps, the great ball, half emerald,

half ruby, which in the ancient ages was rolled across the plaza to signify the passage of the old year.

Ceistân tumbled them all back in the coffer. Relicts on this planet of dead cities had no value, and synthetic gems were infinitely superior in luminosity and water.

Leaving the Mosque, he studied the height of the suns. The zenith was past, the moving balls of pink fire leaned to the west. He hesitated, frowning and blinking at the hot earthen walls, considering that not impossibly both coffer and parchment were unfounded rumor, like so many other tales regarding dead Therlatch.

A gust of wind swirled across the plaza and Ceistan choked on a dry throat. He spat and an acrid taste bit his tongue. An old fountain opened in the wall nearby; he examined it wistfully, but water was not even a memory along these dead streets.

Once again he cleared his throat, spat, turned across the city toward the Hall of Relicts.

He entered the great nave, past square pillars built of earthen brick. Pink shafts of light struck down from the cracks and gaps in the roof, and he was like a midge in the vast space. To all sides were niches cased in glass, and each held an object of ancient reverence: the Armor in which Plange the Forewarned led the Blue Flags; the coronet of the First Serpent; an array of antique Padang skulls; Princess Thermosteraliam's bridal gown of woven cobweb palladium, as fresh as the day she wore it; the original Tablets of Legality; the great conch throne of an early dynasty; a dozen other objects. But the coffer was not among them.

Ceistan sought for entrance to a possible crypt, but except where the currents of dusty air had channeled grooves in the porphyry, the floor was smooth.

Out once more into the dead streets, and now the suns had passed behind the crumbled roofs, leaving the streets in magenta shadow.

With leaden feet, burning throat and a sense of defeat, Ceistan turned to the Sumptuar, on the citadel. Up the wide steps, under the verdigris-fronted portico into a lobby painted with vivid frescoes. These depicted the maidens of ancient Therlatch at work, at play, amid sorrow and joy: slim creatures with short black hair and glowing ivory skin, as graceful as water-vanes, as round and delec-

table as chermoyan plums. Ceistan passed through the lobby with many side-glances, thinking sadly that these ancient creatures of delight were now the dust he trod under his feet.

He walked down a corridor which made a circuit of the building, and from which the chambers and apartments of the Sumptuar might be entered. The wisps of a wonderful rug crunched under his feet, and the walls displayed moldy tatters, once tapestries of the finest weave. At the entrance to each chamber a fresco pictured the Sumptuar maiden and the sign she served; at each of these chambers Ceistan paused, made a quick investigation, and so passed on to the next. The beams slanting in through the cracks served him as a gauge of time, and they flattened ever more toward the horizontal.

Chamber after chamber after chamber. There were chests in some, altars in others, cases of manifestos, triptychs, and fonts in others. But never the chest he sought.

And ahead was the lobby where he had entered the building. Three more chambers were to be searched, then the light would be gone.

He came to the first of these, and this was hung with a new curtain. Pushing it aside, he found himself looking into an outside court, full in the long light of the twin suns. A fountain of water trickled down across steps of apple-green jade into a garden as soft and fresh and green as any in the north. And rising in alarm from a couch was a maiden, as vivid and delightful as any in the frescoes. She had short dark hair, a face as pure and delicate as the great white frangipani she wore over her ear.

For an instant Ceistan and the maiden stared eye to eye; then her alarm faded and she smiled shyly.

"Who are you?" Ceistan asked in wonder. "Are you a ghost or do you live here in the dust?"

"I am real," she said. "My home is to the south, at the Palram Oasis, and this is the period of solitude to which all maidens of the race submit when aspiring for Upper Instruction. . . . So without fear may you come beside me, and rest, and drink of fruit wine and be my companion through the lonely night, for this is my last week of solitude and I am weary of my own aloneness."

Ceistan took a step forward, then hesitated. "I must fulfill my

mission. I seek the brass coffer containing the Crown and Shield Parchment. Do you know of this?"

She shook her head. "It is nowhere in the Sumptuar." She rose to her feet, stretching her ivory arms as a kitten stretches. "Abandon your search, and come let me refresh you."

Ceistan looked at her, looked up at the fading light, looked down the corridor to the two doors yet remaining. "First I must complete my search; I owe duty to my lord Glay, who will be nailed under an air-sled and sped west unless I bring him aid."

The maiden said with a pout, "Go then to your dusty chamber; and go with a dry throat. You will find nothing, and if you persist so stubbornly, I will be gone when you return."

"So let it be," said Ceistan.

He turned away, marched down the corridor. The first chamber was bare and dry as a bone. In the second and last, a man's skeleton lay tumbled in a corner; this Ceistan saw in the last rosy light of the twin suns.

There was no brass coffer, no parchment. So Glay must die, and Ceistan's heart hung heavy.

He returned to the chamber where he had found the maiden, but she had departed. The fountain had been stopped, and moisture only filmed the stones.

Ceistan called, "Maiden, where are you? Return, my obligation is at an end. . . ."

There was no response.

Ceistan shrugged, turned to the lobby and so outdoors, to grope his way through the deserted twilight street to the portal and his air-sled.

Dobnor Daksat became aware that the big man in the embroidered black cloak was speaking to him.

Orienting himself to his surroundings, which were at once familiar and strange, he also became aware that the man's voice was condescending, supercilious.

"You are competing in a highly advanced classification," he said. "I marvel at your—ah, confidence." And he eyed Daksat with a gleaming and speculative eye.

Daksat looked down at the floor, frowned at the sight of his clothes. He wore a long cloak of black-purple velvet, swinging like a bell around his ankles. His trousers were of scarlet corduroy, tight at the waist, thigh and calf, with a loose puff of green cloth between calf and ankle. The clothes were his own, obviously: they looked wrong and right at once, as did the carved gold knuckle-guards he wore on his hands.

The big man in the dark cloak continued speaking, looking at a point over Daksat's head, as if Daksat were nonexistent.

"Clauktaba has won Imagist honors over the years. Bel-Washab was the Korsi Victor last month; Tol Morabaít is an acknowledged master of the technique. And then there is Ghisel Ghang of West Ind, who knows no peer in the creation of fire-stars, and Pulakt Havjorska, the Champion of the Island Realm. So it becomes a matter of skepticism whether you, new, inexperienced, without a fund of images, can do more than embarrass us all with your mental poverty."

Daksat's brain was yet wrestling with his bewilderment, and he could feel no strong resentment at the big man's evident contempt. He said, "Just what is all this? I'm not sure that I understand my position."

The man in the black cloak inspected him quizzically. "So, now you commence to experience trepidation? Justly, I assure you." He sighed, waved his hands. "Well, well—young men will be impetuous, and perhaps you have formed images you considered not discreditable. In any event, the public eye will ignore you for the glories of Clauktaba's geometrics and Ghisel Ghang's star-bursts. Indeed, I counsel you, keep your images small, drab and confined; you will so avoid the faults of bombast and discord. . . . Now, it is time to go to your imagicon. This way, then. Remember, greys, browns, lavenders, perhaps a few tones of ocher and rust; then the spectators will understand that you compete for the schooling alone, and do not actively challenge the masters. This way then—"

He opened a door and led Dobnor Daksat up a stair and so out into the night.

They stood in a great stadium, facing six great screens forty feet high. Behind them in the dark sat tier upon tier of spectators—

thousands and thousands, and their sounds came as a soft crush. Daksat turned to see them, but all their faces and their individualities had melted into the entity as a whole.

"Here," said the big man, "this is your apparatus. Seat yourself and I will adjust the ceretemps."

Daksat suffered himself to be placed in a heavy chair, so soft and deep that he felt himself to be floating. Adjustments were made at his head and neck and the bridge of his nose. He felt a sharp prick, a pressure, a throb, and then a soothing warmth. From the distance, a voice called out over the crowd:

"Two minutes to grey mist! Two minutes to grey mist! Attend, imagists, two minutes to grey mist!"

The big man stooped over him. "Can you see well?"

Daksat raised himself a trifle. "Yes. . . . All is clear."

"Very well. At 'grey mist', this little filament will glow. When it dies, then it is your screen, and you must imagine your best."

The far voice said, "One minute to grey mist! The order is Pulakt Havjorska, Tol Morabaít, Ghisel Ghang, Dobnor Daksat, Clauktaba and Bel-Washab. There are no handicaps; all colors and shapes are permitted. Relax then, ready your lobes, and now—grey mist!"

The light glowed on the panel of Daksat's chair, and he saw five of the six screens light to a pleasant pearl-grey, swirling a trifle as if agitated, excited. Only the screen before him remained dull. The big man who stood behind him reached down, prodded. "Grey mist, Daksat; are you deaf and blind?"

Daksat thought grey mist, and instantly his screen sprang to life, displaying a cloud of silver grey, clean and clear.

"Humph," he heard the big man snort. "Somewhat dull and without interest—but I suppose good enough. . . . See how Clauktaba's rings with hints of passion already, quivers with emotion."

And Daksat, noting the screen to his right, saw this to be true. The grey, without actually displaying color, flowed and filmed as if suppressing a vast flood of light.

Now to the far left, on Pulakt Havjorska's screen, color glowed. It was a gambit image, modest and restrained—a green jewel dripping a rain of blue and silver drops which struck a black ground and disappeared in little orange explosions.

Then Tol Morabaít's screen glowed: a black and white checkerboard with certain of the squares flashing suddenly green, red, blue and yellow—warm searching colors, pure as shafts from a rainbow. The image disappeared in a flush mingled of rose and blue.

Ghisel Ghang wrought a circle of yellow which quivered, brought forth a green halo, which in turn bulging, gave rise to a larger band of brilliant black and white. In the center formed a complex kaleidoscopic pattern. The pattern suddenly vanished in a brilliant flash of light; on the screen for an instant or two appeared the identical pattern in a complete new suit of colors. A ripple of sound from the spectators greeted this *tour de force.*

The light on Daksat's panel died. Behind him he felt a prod. "Now."

Daksat eyed the screen and his mind was blank of ideas. He ground his teeth. Anything. Anything. A picture. . . . He imagined a view across the meadowlands beside the river Melramy.

"Hm," said the big man behind him. "Pleasant. A pleasant fantasy, and rather original."

Puzzled, Daksat examined the picture on the screen. So far as he could distinguish, it was an uninspired reproduction of a scene he knew well. Fantasy? Was that what was expected? Very well, he'd produce fantasy. He imagined the meadows glowing, molten, white-hot. The vegetation, the old cairns slumped into a viscous seethe. The surface smoothed, became a mirror which reflected the Copper Crags.

Behind him the big man grunted. "A little heavy-handed, that last, and thereby you destroyed the charming effect of those unearthly colors and shapes. . . ."

Daksat slumped back in his chair, frowning, eager for his turn to come again.

Meanwhile Clauktaba created a dainty white blossom with purple stamens on a green stalk. The petals wilted, the stamens discharged a cloud of swirling yellow pollen.

Then Bel Washab, at the end of the line, painted his screen a luminous underwater green. It rippled, bulged, and a black irregular blot marred the surface. From the center of the blot seeped a trickle of hot gold which quickly meshed and veined the black blot.

Such was the first passage.

There was a pause of several seconds. "Now," breathed the voice behind Daksat, "now the competition begins."

On Pulakt Havjorska's screen appeared an angry sea of color: waves of red, green, blue, an ugly mottling. Dramatically a yellow shape appeared at the lower right, vanquished the chaos. It spread over the screen, the center went lime-green. A black shape appeared, split, bowed softly and easily to both sides. Then turning, the two shapes wandered into the background, twisting, bending with supple grace. Far down a perspective they merged, darted forward like a lance, spread out into a series of lances, formed a slanting pattern of slim black bars.

"Superb!" hissed the big man. "The timing, so just, so exact!"

Tol Morabaít replied with a fuscous brown field threaded with crimson lines and blots. Vertical green hatching formed at the left, strode across the screen to the right. The brown field pressed forward, bulged through the green bars, pressed hard, broke, and segments flitted forward to leave the screen. On the black background behind the green hatching, which now faded, lay a human brain, pink, pulsing. The brain sprouted six insect-like legs, scuttled crabwise back into the distance.

Ghisel Ghang brought forth one of his fire-bursts—a small pellet of bright blue exploding in all directions, the tips working and writhing through wonderful patterns in the five colors, blue, violet, white, purple and light green.

Dobnor Daksat, rigid as a bar, sat with hands clenched and teeth grinding into teeth. Now! Was not his brain as excellent as those of the far lands? Now!

On the screen appeared a tree, conventionalized in greens and blues, and each leaf was a tongue of fire. From these fires wisps of smoke arose on high to form a cloud which worked and swirled, then emptied a cone of rain about the tree. The flames vanished and in their places appeared star-shaped white flowers. From the cloud came a bolt of lightning, shattering the tree to agonized fragments of glass. Another bolt into the brittle heap and the screen exploded in a great gout of white, orange and black.

The voice of the big man said doubtfully, "On the whole well

done, but mind my warning, and create more modest images, since—"

"Silence!" said Dobnor Daksat in a harsh voice.

So the competition went, round after round of spectacles, some sweet as canmel honey, others as violent as the storms which circle the poles. Color strove with color, patterns evolved and changed, sometimes in glorious cadence, sometimes in the bitter discord necessary to the strength of the image.

And Daksat built dream after dream, while his tension vanished, and he forgot all save the racing pictures in his mind and on the screen, and his images became as complex and subtle as those of the masters.

"One more passage," said the big man behind Daksat, and now the imagists brought forth the master-dreams: Pulakt Havjorska, the growth and decay of a beautiful city; Tol Morabait, a quiet composition of green and white interrupted by a marching army of insects who left a dirty wake, and who were joined in battle by men in painted leather armor and tall hats, armed with short swords and flails. The insects were destroyed and chased off the screen; the corpses became bones and faded to twinkling blue dust. Ghisel Ghang created three fire-bursts simultaneously, each different, a gorgeous display.

Daksat imagined a smooth pebble, magnified it to a block of marble, chipped it away to create the head of a beautiful maiden. For a moment she stared forth and varying emotions crossed her face—joy at her sudden existence, pensive thought, and at last fright. Her eyes turned milky opaque blue, the face changed to a laughing sardonic mask, black-cheeked with a fleering mouth. The head tilted, the mouth spat into the air. The head flattened into a black background, the drops of spittle shone like fire, became stars, constellations, and one of these expanded, became a planet with configurations dear to Daksat's heart. The planet hurtled off into darkness, the constellations faded. Dobnor Daksat relaxed. His last image. He sighed, exhausted.

The big man in the black cloak removed the harness in brittle silence. At last he asked, "The planet you imagined in that last screening, was that a creation or a remembrance of actuality? It was none

of our system here, and it rang with the clarity of truth."

Dobnor Daksat stared at him puzzled, and the words faltered in his throat. "But it is—home! This world! Was it not this world?"

The big man looked at him strangely, shrugged, turned away. "In a moment now the winner of the contest will be made known and the jeweled brevet awarded."

The day was gusty and overcast, the galley was low and black, manned by the oarsmen of Belaclaw. Ergan stood on the poop, staring across the two miles of bitter sea to the coast of Racland, where he knew the sharp-faced Racs stood watching from the headlands.

A gout of water erupted a few hundred yards astern.

Ergan spoke to the helmsman. "Their guns have better range than we bargained for. Better stand offshore another mile and we'll take our chances with the current."

Even as he spoke, there came a great whistle and he glimpsed a black pointed projectile slanting down at him. It struck the waist of the galley, exploded. Timber, bodies, metal, flew everywhere, and the galley laid its broken back into the water, doubled up and sank.

Ergan, jumping clear, discarded his sword, casque and greaves almost as he hit the chill grey water. Gasping from the shock, he swam in circles, bobbing up and down in the chop; then, finding a length of timber, he clung to it for support.

From the shores of Racland a longboat put forth and approached, bow churning white foam as it rose and fell across the waves. Ergan turned loose the timber and swam as rapidly as possible from the wreck. Better drowning than capture; there would be more mercy from the famine-fish which swarmed the waters than from the pitiless Racs.

So he swam, but the current took him to the shore, and at last, struggling feebly, he was cast upon a pebbly beach.

Here he was discovered by a gang of Rac youths and marched to a nearby command post. He was tied and flung into a cart and so conveyed to the city Korsapan.

In a grey room he was seated facing an intelligence officer of the Rac secret police, a man with the grey skin of a toad, a moist grey mouth, eager, searching eyes.

"You are Ergan," said the officer. "Emissary to the Bargee of Salomdek. What was your mission?"

Ergan stared back eye to eye, hoping that a happy and convincing response would find his lips. None came, and the truth would incite an immediate invasion of both Belaclaw and Salomdek by the tall thin-headed Rac soldiers, who wore black uniforms and black boots.

Ergan said nothing. The officer leaned forward. "I ask you once more; then you will be taken to the room below." He said "Room Below" as if the words were capitalized, and he said it with soft relish.

Ergan, in a cold sweat, for he knew of the Rac torturers, said, "I am not Ergan; my name is Ervard; I am an honest trader in pearls."

"This is untrue," said the Rac. "Your aide was captured and under the compression pump he blurted up your name with his lungs."

"I am Ervard," said Ergan, his bowels quaking.

The Rac signaled. "Take him to the Room Below."

A man's body, which has developed nerves as outposts against danger, seems especially intended for pain, and coöperates wonderfully with the craft of the torturer. These characteristics of the body had been studied by the Rac specialists, and other capabilities of the human nervous system had been blundered upon by accident. It has been found that certain programs of pressure, heat, strain, friction, torque, surge, jerk, sonic and visual shock, vermin, stench and vileness created cumulative effects, whereas a single method, used to excess, lost its stimulation thereby.

All this lore and cleverness was lavished upon Ergan's citadel of nerves, and they inflicted upon him the entire gamut of pain: the sharp twinges, the dull lasting joint-aches which groaned by night, the fiery flashes, the assaults of filth and lechery, together with shocks of occasional tenderness when he would be allowed to glimpse the world he had left.

Then back to the Room Below.

But always: "I am Ervard the trader." And always he tried to goad his mind over the tissue barrier to death, but always the mind hesitated at the last toppling step, and Ergan lived.

The Racs tortured by routine, so that the expectation, the approach of the hour, brought with it as much torment as the act itself. And then the heavy unhurried steps outside the cell, the feeble thrashing around to evade, the harsh laughs when they cornered him and carried him forth, and the harsh laughs when three hours later they threw him sobbing and whimpering back to the pile of straw that was his bed.

"I am Ervard," he said, and trained his mind to believe that this was the truth, so that never would they catch him unaware. "I am Ervard! I am Ervard, I trade in pearls!"

He tried to strangle himself on straw, but a slave watched always, and this was not permitted.

He attempted to die by self-suffocation, and would have been glad to succeed, but always as he sank into blessed numbness, so did his mind relax and his motor nerves take up the mindless business of breathing once more.

He ate nothing, but this meant little to the Racs, as they injected him full of tonics, sustaining drugs and stimulants, so that he might always be keyed to the height of his awareness.

"I am Ervard," said Ergan, and the Racs gritted their teeth angrily. The case was now a challenge; he defied their ingenuity, and they puzzled long and carefully upon refinements and delicacies, new shapes to the iron tools, new types of jerk ropes, new directions for the strains and pressures. Even when it was no longer important whether he was Ergan or Ervard, since war now raged, he was kept and maintained as a problem, an ideal case; so he was guarded and cosseted with even more than usual care, and the Rac torturers mulled over their techniques, making changes here, improvements there.

Then one day the Belaclaw galleys landed and the feather-crested soldiers fought past the walls of Korsapan.

The Racs surveyed Ergan with regret. "Now we must go, and still you will not submit to us."

"I am Ervard," croaked that which lay on the table. "Ervard the trader."

A splintering crash sounded overhead.

"We must go," said the Racs. "Your people have stormed the

city. If you tell the truth, you may live. If you lie, we kill you. So there is your choice. Your life for the truth."

"The truth?" muttered Ergan. "It is a trick—" And then he caught the victory chant of the Belaclaw soldiery. "The truth? Why not? . . . Very well." And he said, "I am Ervard," for now he believed this to be the truth.

Galactic Prime was a lean man with reddish-brown hair sparse across a fine arch of skull. His face, undistinguished otherwise, was given power by great dark eyes flickering with a light like fire behind smoke. Physically he had passed the peak of his youth; his arms and legs were thin and loose-jointed; his head inclined forward as if weighted by the intricate machinery of his brain.

Arising from the couch, smiling faintly, he looked across the arcade to the eleven Elders. They sat at a table of polished wood, backs to a wall festooned with vines. They were grave men, slow in their motions, and their faces were lined with wisdom and insight. By the ordained system, Prime was the executive of the universe, the Elders the deliberative body, invested with certain restrictive powers.

"Well?"

The Chief Elder without haste raised his eyes from the computer. "You are the first to arise from the couch."

Prime turned a glance up the arcade, still smiling faintly. The others lay variously: some with arms clenched, rigid as bars; others huddled in foetal postures. One had slumped from the couch half to the floor; his eyes were open, staring at remoteness.

Prime returned to the Chief Elder, who watched him with detached curiosity. "Has the optimum been established?"

The Chief Elder consulted the computer. "Twenty-six thirty-seven is the optimum score."

Prime waited, but the Chief Elder said no more. Prime stepped to the alabaster balustrade beyond the couches. He leaned forward, looked out across the vista—miles and miles of sunny haze, with a twinkling sea in the distance. A breeze blew past his face, ruffling the scant russet strands of his hair. He took a deep breath, flexed his fingers and hands, for the memory of the Rac torturers was still

heavy on his mind. After a moment he swung around, leaned back, resting his elbows upon the balustrade. He glanced once more down the line of couches; there were still no signs of vitality from the candidates.

"Twenty-six thirty-seven," he muttered. "I venture to estimate my own score at twenty-five ninety. In the last episode I recall an incomplete retention of personality."

"Twenty-five seventy-four," said the Chief Elder. "The computer judged Bearwald the Halforn's final defiance of the Brand warriors unprofitable."

Prime considered. "The point is well made. Obstinacy serves no purpose unless it advances a predetermined end. It is a flaw I must seek to temper." He looked along the line of Elders, from face to face. "You make no enunciations, you are curiously mute."

He waited; the Chief Elder made no response.

"May I inquire the high score?"

"Twenty-five seventy-four."

Prime nodded. "Mine."

"Yours is the high score," said the Chief Elder.

Prime's smile disappeared; a puzzled line appeared across his brow. "In spite of this, you are still reluctant to confirm my second span of authority; there are still doubts among you."

"Doubts and misgivings," replied the Chief Elder.

Prime's mouth pulled in at the corners, although his brows were still raised in polite inquiry. "Your attitude puzzles me. My record is one of selfless service. My intelligence is phenomenal, and in this final test, which I designed to dispel your last doubts, I attained the highest score. I have proved my social intuition and flexibility, my leadership, devotion to duty, imagination and resolution. In every commensurable aspect, I fulfill best the qualifications for the office I hold."

The Chief Elder looked up and down the line of his fellows. There were none who wished to speak. The Chief Elder squared himself in his chair, sat back.

"Our attitude is difficult to represent. Everything is as you say. Your intelligence is beyond dispute, your character is exemplary, you have served your term with honor and devotion. You have

earned our respect, admiration and gratitude. We realize also that you seek this second term from praiseworthy motives: you regard yourself as the man best able to coördinate the complex business of the galaxy."

Prime nodded grimly. "But you think otherwise."

"Our position is perhaps not quite so blunt."

"Precisely what is your position?" Prime gestured along the couches. "Look at these men. They are the finest of the galaxy. One man is dead. That one stirring on the third couch has lost his mind; he is a lunatic. The others are sorely shaken. And never forget that this test has been expressly designed to measure the qualities essential to the Galactic Prime."

"This test has been of great interest to us," said the Chief Elder mildly. "It has considerably affected our thinking."

Prime hesitated, plumbing the unspoken overtones of the words. He came forward, seated himself across from the line of Elders. With a narrow glance he searched the faces of the eleven men, tapped once, twice, three times with his fingertips on the polished wood, leaned back in the chair.

"As I have pointed out, the test has gauged each candidate for the exact qualities essential to the optimum conduct of office, in this fashion: Earth of the twentieth century is a planet of intricate conventions; on Earth the candidate, as Arthur Caversham, is required to use his social intuition—a quality highly important in this galaxy of two billion suns. On Belotsi, Bearwald the Halforn is tested for courage and the ability to conduct positive action. At the dead city Therlatch on Praesepe Three, the candidate, as Ceistan, is rated for devotion to duty, and as Dobnor Daksat at the Imagicon on Staff, his creative conceptions are rated against the most fertile imaginations alive. Finally as Ergan, on Chankozar, his will, persistence and ultimate fiber are explored to their extreme limits.

"Each candidate is placed in the identical set of circumstances by a trick of temporal, dimensional and cerebro-neural meshing which is rather complicated for the present discussion. Sufficient that each candidate is objectively rated by his achievements, and that the results are commensurable."

He paused, looked shrewdly along the line of grave faces. "I must

emphasize that although I myself designed and arranged the test, I thereby gained no advantage. The mnemonic synapses are entirely disengaged from incident to incident, and only the candidate's basic personality acts. All were tested under precisely the same conditions. In my opinion the scores registered by the computer indicate an objective and reliable index of the candidate's ability for the highly responsible office of Galactic Executive."

The Chief Elder said, "The scores are indeed significant."

"Then—you approve my candidacy?"

The Chief Elder smiled. "Not so fast. Admittedly you are intelligent, admittedly you have accomplished much during your term as Prime. But much remains to be done."

"Do you suggest that another man would have achieved more?"

The Chief Elder shrugged. "I have no conceivable way of knowing. I point out your achievements, such as the Glenart civilization, the Dawn Time on Masilis, the reign of King Karal on Aevir, the suppression of the Arkid Revolt. There are many such examples. But there are also shortcomings: the wars and detestable totalitarian governments on Earth, the savagery on Belotsi and Chankozar, so pointedly emphasized in your test. Then there is the decadence of the planets in the Eleven Hundred Ninth Cluster, the rise of the Priest-kings on Fiir, and much else."

Prime clenched his mouth and the fires behind his eyes burnt more brightly.

The Chief Elder continued. "One of the most remarkable phenomena of the galaxy is the tendency of humanity to absorb and manifest the personality of the Prime. There seems to be a tremendous resonance which vibrates from the brain of the Prime through the minds of man from Center to the outer fringes. It is a matter which should be studied, analyzed and subjected to control. The effect is as if every thought of the Prime is magnified a billion-fold, as if every mood sets the tone for a thousand civilizations, every facet of his personality reflects in the ethics of a thousand cultures."

Prime said tonelessly, "I have remarked this phenomenon and have thought much on it. Prime's commands are promulgated in such a way as to exert subtle rather than overt influence; perhaps here is the background of the matter. In any event, the fact of this

influence is even more reason to select for the office a man of demonstrated virtue."

"Well put," said the Chief Elder. "Your character is indeed beyond reproach. However, we of the Elders are concerned by the rising tide of authoritarianism among the planets of the galaxy. We suspect that this principle of resonance is at work. You are a man of intense and indomitable will, and we feel that your influence has unwittingly prompted an irruption of aristocracies."

Prime was silent a moment. He looked down the line of couches where the other candidates were recovering awareness. They were men of various races: a pale Northkin of Palast, a Negro of Earth, a stocky red Hawolo, a grey-haired grey-eyed Islander from the Sea Planet—each the outstanding man of the planet of his birth. Those who had returned to consciousness sat quietly, collecting their wits, or lay back on the couch, trying to expunge the test from their minds. There had been a toll taken: one lay dead, another bereft of his wits crouched whimpering beside his couch.

The Chief Elder said, "The objectionable aspects of your character are perhaps best exemplified by the test itself."

Prime opened his mouth; the Chief Elder held up his hand. "Let me speak; I will try to deal fairly with you. When I am done, you may say your say.

"I repeat that your basic direction is displayed by the details of the test that you devised. The qualities you measured were those which you considered the most important: that is, those ideals by which you guide your own life. This arrangement I am sure was completely unconscious, and hence completely revealing. You conceive the essential characteristics of the Prime to be social intuition, aggressiveness, loyalty, imagination and dogged persistence. As a man of strong character you seek to exemplify these ideals in your own conduct; therefore it is not at all surprising that in this test, designed by you, with a scoring system calibrated by you, your score should be highest.

"Let me clarify the idea by an analogy. If the Eagle were conducting a test to determine the King of Beasts, he would rate all the candidates on their ability to fly; necessarily he would win. In this fashion the Mole would consider ability to dig important; by his

system of testing *he* would inevitably emerge King of Beasts."

Prime laughed sharply, ran a hand through his sparse red-brown locks. "I am neither Eagle nor Mole."

The Chief Elder shook his head. "No. You are zealous, dutiful, imaginative, indefatigable—so you have demonstrated, as much by specifying tests for these characteristics as by scoring high in these same tests. But conversely, by the very absence of other tests you demonstrate deficiencies in your character."

"And these are?"

"Sympathy. Compassion. Kindness." The Chief Elder settled back in his chair. "Strange. Your predecessor two times removed was rich in these qualities. During his term, the great religious and humanitarian systems based on the idea of human brotherhood sprang up across the universe. Another example of resonance—but I digress."

Prime said with a sardonic twitch of his mouth, "May I ask this: have you selected the next Galactic Prime?"

The Chief Elder nodded. "A definite choice has been made."

"What was his score in the test?"

"By your scoring system—seventeen eighty. He did poorly as Arthur Caversham; he tried to explain the advantages of nudity to the policeman. He lacked the ability to concoct an instant subterfuge; he has little of your quick craft. As Arthur Caversham he found himself naked. He is sincere and straightforward, hence tried to expound the positive motivations for his state, rather than discover the means to evade the penalties."

"Tell me more about this man," said Prime shortly.

"As Bearwald the Halforn, he led his band to the hive of the Brands on Mount Medallion, but instead of burning the hive, he called forth to the queen, begging her to end the useless slaughter. She reached out from the doorway, drew him within and killed him. He failed—but the computer still rated him highly on his forthright approach.

"At Therlatch, his conduct was as irreproachable as yours, and at the Imagicon his performance was adequate. Yours approached the brilliance of the Master Imagists, which is high achievement indeed.

"The Rac tortures are the most trying element of the test. You knew well you could resist limitless pain; therefore you ordained that all other candidates must likewise possess this attribute. The new Prime is sadly deficient here. He is sensitive, and the idea of one man intentionally inflicting pain upon another sickens him. I may add that none of the candidates achieved a perfect count in the last episode. Two others equaled your score—"

Prime evinced interest. "Which are they?"

The Chief Elder pointed them out—a tall hard-muscled man with rock-hewn face standing by the alabaster balustrade gazing moodily out across the sunny distance, and a man of middle age who sat with his legs folded under him, watching a point three feet before him with an expression of imperturbable placidity.

"One is utterly obstinate and hard," said the Chief Elder. "He refused to say a single word. The other assumes an outer objectivity when unpleasantness overtakes him. Others among the candidates fared not so well; mental readjustments and therapy will be necessary in almost all cases."

Their eyes went to the witless creature with vacant eyes who padded up and down the aisle, humming and muttering quietly to himself.

"The tests were by no means valueless," said the Chief Elder. "We learned a great deal. By your system of scoring, the competition rated you most high. By other standards which we Elders postulated, your place was lower."

With a tight mouth Prime inquired, "Who is this paragon of altruism, kindliness, sympathy and generosity?"

The lunatic wandered close, fell on his hands and knees, crawled whimpering to the wall. He pressed his face to the cool stone, stared blankly up at Prime. His mouth hung loose, his chin was wet, his eyes rolled apparently free of each other.

The Chief Elder smiled in great compassion. Sadly he stroked the mad creature's head. "This is he. Here is the man we select."

The old Galactic Prime sat silent, mouth compressed, eyes burning like far volcanoes.

At his feet the new Prime, Lord of Two Billion Suns, found a dead leaf, put it into his mouth, and began to chew.

by Lester del Rey

THE DEADLIEST FEMALE

Angered or thwarted, the normal female of the species can be deadly enough, Lord knows . . . and Lee was no ordinary female — in fact, she belonged to no ordinary species!

MARK TAYOWA groaned as the jeep went over a bump in the road across the spaceport, and his eyes lanced upward to the lanky bulk of the driver. The man chuckled, and Mark turned away, nursing his aching head in silence. Damn the smugness of these Normals!

All right, so he was a freak. He'd come into the world without tonsils, adenoids, sinuses or appendix; he weighed a hundred pounds even, and barely topped four feet of stocky, heavy-boned height. He had a nerve current speed of thirty-two hundred feet a second instead of eleven hundred, and he could take eight gravities of pressure, upright. But none of that made his hangover more pleasant.

"Wipe it off!" he told the driver, infuriated by the man's grin.

The grin widened. "You're *cute!*" the driver said, in a reedy falsetto. "I know Maisie! Some mouse. And that's some mouse you got on the eye."

For a second, Mark's arm tautened with sheer hunger to drive a fist into the other's soft-muscled belly. Then he collapsed into a sick slump on the seat. Yeah, Maisie. He'd picked her up somewhere

along the line, celebrating his graduation from Spaceman special flight training and his simultaneous assignment to his first ship—in only nine months out from the crèche, too. She'd gotten him drunk, calmly picked his pocket, and then yelled for help. Naturally, the Normals stuck together against a freak. He fingered his blackened eye, then cupped his thin, strong hands around his head and groaned.

Women! It was bad enough to be brought up in the hothouse atmosphere of a crèche, raised with a few other Spacemen by Normals who were entirely too blasted "understanding", without even seeing a girl; but then to get out into the world and find the females of your own species were as flat-chested as men, and the Normal girls either wanted to pet you like a dog or roll you!

The driver nudged him. "We're here, Peewee. All out. End of the line."

Mark climbed out, lifting his thin bag of possessions. The *Venture* was an old ship, he saw, but a sound one. And it was obviously near blast-off. He should have been there an hour before, but he'd slept through the alarm. Then he saw the big Normal on the ramp, carrying triple stars on his shoulder, and snapped into salute. "Mark Tayowa, lieutenant assigned to *Venture,* sir."

The man turned and shouted inside. "Hey, Lee—it's here. Blast at three-oh-seven." Then he nodded toward Mark, and jerked a thumb inward. "Okay, you and Lee Tanming have it. And you'd better report in—you're graduated now; you don't have to stand here saluting all day."

Mark went up the little ramp, and a muffled voice came down the tiny communication shaft from control. "Seal up, Tayowa. We blast in one minute!"

He triggered the seals, watched the ramp come up and sink into place, and went through the inner lock, checking to make sure it also sealed properly. Then he hesitated, while a rumbling came from below, and the sudden punch of acceleration hit him. They were lifting at five gravities, headed out for nine months to Pluto, and he was on his first actual trip into space—the work for which he'd been destined through eight generations. He sampled it, while he began climbing up to the control room, and even the hangover was no longer important.

Starting now, he was free of the Normals, out where he belonged —where his body was no freak, but something tailored ideally for its purpose.

Then he stopped. The figure stooped over the controls was unmistakable. Stringy hair was caught back in double braids, and the shoulders had a female slope to them, while the rest of the three-foot-eight figure showed the stringy, neuter angularity of the females of his race. As he looked, Lee Tanming turned, her narrow body jerking about with a total lack of grace. For nine months he had to be cooped up with a female!

She gave him one disgusted glance before she swung back to reset the controls. "My last trip before they ground me for good," she said bitterly, "and they give me a green kid who hasn't got the brains to stay away from those grinning spaceport tramps. Where's your luggage, Romeo?"

He doubled his fists, then shrugged wearily. "Okay. Okay, I guess the whole field knew about it. Maisie got my supply money. Go ahead, laugh."

"You'll have to get funnier than that, Bobo. I don't give a damn how dumb you are ashore. But since you have one suit to your name, you'll wash it every night, or I'll throw it in the incinerator." She turned for another quick glance at him. "We'll have to live together, sonny—and I don't like it any better than you. Get some aspirin from the galley stock, toss your duffle in cabin two—mine's number one, with the lock—and then get below. Takes someone in the engine-room eventually."

He looked at her insignia, knowing Spacewomen were never promoted higher than lieutenants—his own rank—since they were automatically retired at thirty-five. That was about to happen to Tanming, evidently, and she was sore about it, "Yessir, *Captain!*"

"Seniority, sonny," she said. "I've been running the Pluto jump eleven years. *And* the fact I can stand three more gravs than you can, from practice. Get below!"

To demonstrate, she began jockeying the controls, increasing and decreasing the acceleration pressure. He stood it a few seconds, until his stomach gave in. Then he lurched away, hunting for the latrine. He found it barely in time.

It was going to be a great trip.

There was the smell of coffee when he came to, and he was surprised to find himself in a hammock. Some of the ache was gone, and his stomach felt better. He eased to the deck, dreading what he'd see when he picked up his suit; but it had been cleaned. Then Lee's fist banged on the door, and her voice reached him. "Come and get it, sonny. And better grab that aspirin on the way."

Mark shook his head, and regretted it. But maybe he'd misjudged her. He owed her an apology for not tending ship, at least; he knew she must have had hell until speed built up, running both control and engines. He'd been cross-grained from the Normals, and it must have been tough on her, nearing thirty-five and about to be grounded . . . whereas he was good for fifty years' service, and they both knew it.

He climbed to the galley, where a plastube of coffee waited, and headed for the medicine kit on the wall, his hands shaking. From above, an alarm sounded, and then there was a muttered damn from Lee. The ship leaped suddenly—and the medicine chest came down under his clutching fingers, bottles and supplies breaking under heavy acceleration as they hit the floor.

Moments later, she was at the door. "Nice work, sonny. Well, no medical supplies, not even a fever thermometer now. If you get space chills, all I can do for you is stuff you out the airlock. We're running a library and supplies to Pluto, not a nursery, but I guess the brass on Earth can't tell the difference. Normal administrators!"

"There must be medical supplies in the cargo—" he began.

Her laughter cut him off. "When Pluto's supercold hi-vac labs are the source of our top medicals, systemwide? We're shipping out plutonium, sonny—pure energy, practically. Scared?"

He knew what she meant. With plutonium in its insulating wraps as cargo, they'd need just one good pea-sized meteorite through the hull to blast them into nothingness. But he shook his head.

"Liar," she remarked coldly. "Incidentally, I cleaned up this time for you. Don't mention it. From now on, you do *all* the cooking and washing aboard. I'm turning in. Take over, sonny. And when you get me up, I'll expect these clothes clean, my eggs scrambled

lightly, and no damn-fool nonsense with the controls."

She swung down to Cabin 1, and the lock clicked. Mark picked up his coffee—which was lousy, saccharine-sweet—and apologized to himself for any good ideas of her he'd had. It looked as if she'd spent her life building up resentment at being female and not a Normal, and now meant to take it all out on him. She'd probably get worse.

She did. Lee had imagination enough to vary the beat; she went from synthetic sympathy to biting arrogance, and followed it by long lectures on what would happen if she wrote up his default on takeoff. She told him the rumors about him and Maisie among the port attendants before takeoff. And she refused to lend him even one of her books.

That was the worst of all. Once blast-off is made, most of the trip is pure monotony, and the microcard books are almost a psychological necessity. He should have brought his own—but Maisie's theft had ruled that out. Mark fought it out past Mars and well towards Jupiter, and at times even welcomed the menial duties of cooking and cleaning. But there was still too much time left over.

He broke half a day's silence, finally. "What sort of a library do we ship, and where's it stowed?"

Lee looked up from a book she was too obviously enjoying and shook her hair, filling the air with the perfume she'd found he couldn't stand. "Technical. The hold marked with the big 'Entry Illegal' sign. And that sign means you."

He'd already noticed it and wondered. Well, technical books were better than nothing, and nobody needed to know he'd borrowed them. Of course, the hold was sealed with the official tape and slug, but he knew how to work them well enough to stand all but the most careful inspection. He'd learned that trick in flight training, where the older boys passed the trick down to the younger.

For the next few watches, he noticed her frequent sudden appearance when he was near the hold. He grinned, carefully avoiding any further examination of the seal, until it seemed finally that she'd given up and decided he wasn't going to try it. He waited out two more watches, and then moved suddenly, hastily stripping away the seal and throwing the hatch back.

"I could shoot you, you know."

He jerked around to find her standing casually on the landing above him, with a gun in one thin hand. "You know the rule against breaking into the room of a suspended Normal; this is worse."

He'd already seen the gelatin with which the room was filled, and guessed the answer. Apparently, it took less room to ship out a full Eidetic who could remember everything on a page forever from a single tenth-of-a-second glance. Eidetics were rarer than Spacemen, and breaking one out of suspended animation, where he could stand the acceleration, would more than justify shooting.

Mark began resealing with hands that were sweating. "You could have told me," he muttered.

"More fun this way, sonny. If I enter this on the log—along with the picture I just took—well, you figure what happens when we land! Better think it over."

She bent over, running her hand around the rim of the landing. "Filthy. See that it's clean when I wake up."

Mark tried unsuccessfully to retain some dignity as he climbed down to the engine room, but his hands were shaking. Blackmail now—and she could make it stick, apparently. He brooded over a picture in his mind of her neck between his hands, mentally listening to the snap of her vertebrae. Then he got out his chem-cleaning set and began scrubbing the shaft walls and landings.

But there's a limit to anything. He reached it just beyond Jupiter, when Lee objected to lack of seasoning in the soup. He took the bulb silently back to the galley, located the red pepper and used it generously, together with a bit of mustard and some dehydrated horseradish to make sure. Maybe she'd grown too confident; she squeezed the bulb for a generous sip.

When she came up, yelling, her gun was still clipped to the back of the chair, and Mark was on it in a single pounce. He tossed it into the shaft, put a hand on her shoulder and shoved her down again. "Eat it, you witch. I want to see you eat every damned drop of it. After that, you do the cooking and cleaning around here—and while I'm at it, I'll take that camera of yours."

"Sure of yourself, sonny?"

"Dead sure. Start eating!"

"You wouldn't strike a woman," she suggested, but she was beginning to glance about, and a worried line appeared on her forehead.

"No," he agreed. "Not a woman. But if *you* don't eat every drop of that soup, I'll shove your nose through the—"

Something that might have been a cross between lightning and a battering ram came up from the chair and knocked him crossways. And then she was free of the little table-shelf, and moving in, a sudden grin on her face.

"Big mistake, sonny." A fist came out, changed to a hard-edged palm, and chopped down on the bridge of his nose. "Never hit a woman—" She was lifting him then, over one shoulder, and in a twist that brought him slamming down against the deck. "—who has lived in hi-grav acceleration fourteen years." One foot was on the small of his back, and her arms were dragging his arms backwards, until he could feel the vertebrae begin to snap. "Better scream."

He held out for a moment longer, and she upped the pull. "I can hold it for an hour," she mentioned, hardly breathing harder. "It's worse than space chills. Better scream."

But the advice was needless. She'd increased the tension again, and the scream ripped out of his throat. She kicked him with casual efficiency, hoisted him over her shoulder, and carried him down to his cabin.

"You'll be all right in an hour, sonny. Only, when you come out, stick a *sir* after anything you say to me—or *madam,* I'm not particular. And smile, damn you . . . um-hmm. I think I'm going to like this trip!"

Then she located a slip of cloth in a pocket and held it out. " 'S all right, sonny. Go right ahead and cry it out. A good cry is good for you. Here."

Maybe it was the power of suggestion; Mark felt tears running hotly into his eyes, and all his determination couldn't hold them back.

He had stopped feeling sorry for himself a few minutes later, and

something in the back of his mind had recognized that things could get no worse. With that decision, even the pain couldn't keep his thoughts back. He was remembering everything he knew of space chills, and grimly checking over the details of the ship in his head. The fever thermometer was broken, and the only other temperature gauge was on the thermostat.

His head reeled as he slipped out of the room and down to the engine room. There he worked quickly and surely, assembling what he needed. And he was back in the cabin when she knocked.

"Your watch. Hit the deck."

He plastered a smile on his face, and came out. "Yes, ma'am. I relieve you, ma'am."

After her door clicked, he lost no time. It was easy to clip the bearing on the thermometer needle, and to solder it onto the figure 72°. His watch gave him a timer, and the other little contacts went into place, one by one. Finally, he nodded in satisfaction. He'd have to readjust it every so often, beginning gently and working up. But it was a good job.

And the sleeping tablets hadn't been among the bottles broken, fortunately. He'd slipped them out and had been using them to help sleep away what time he could, but there were still almost a thousand in the bottle.

It should be plenty.

At that, she held out better than he expected. It was two weeks before she mentioned it, though that might have been because the beginning was so gradual. But space chills, a violent reaction of the body to radiation that couldn't all be shielded out from space, were the worst thing that could happen to any space-voyager—even a Spaceman.

They were near Saturn when it finally happened, the final stage he'd been waiting for. He'd left her coffee half an hour before, spiked with a sleeping pill, and the temperature cycle had gone into high. Now he stopped to wipe his face and hands carefully with astringent, and stepped into the control room.

She shook her head groggily, and ran sweating fingers over her forehead. And this time, finally, she got up from the chair and

motioned him down. "Mark—I got 'em again. The fever, this time. Here, feel."

She'd dropped the feud a week before, and he'd let it seem to die. Now he put his hand—still cool from astringent—to her head, and shook his own. "If we only had some medicine. . . . How long since you thought you were freezing? Two hours, wasn't it?"

She nodded unhappily. She'd stopped studying the thermometer, convinced that the fault was her own, since he seemed to feel no change in the temperature.

"Mark, I'm scared. We can't go on—I can't. There's medicine for it down there—down on Titan. Mark, you've got to set down at Gilead!"

He debated it, his face carefully showing doubt—some of which was real. Making a landing on a crude port without two fully competent Spacemen was tricky. But her hand clutched at his arm. "Mark, I'll help all I can. And—I'll do all the cooking, every bit of washing. I'll say *sir* all the way to Pluto and back. I've got to finish this trip—it's my last. And I need the medicine."

Finally he nodded, and reached out for the controls, refiguring the course. She looked her gratitude, and was gone, wiping perspiration from her forehead. He pulled out his astringent, and made sure his face still seemed cool, in spite of the heat of the air. He was fresh again when she came back, bringing him coffee and a bottle of cognac—the only liquor aboard the ship.

It was a long, weary business, fighting down the velocity they'd built up all the way from Earth and jockeying the ship down to Titan; but he was proud of his landing, and she was full of praise. It hadn't been bad for a first major landing, at that. He accepted the double slug of cognac she poured, and let her refill the glass before he got up.

"The doctor's house is up there, just over the hill," she said. He nodded, buckled on a jacket, and headed out.

Sure, he'd get the doctor. He grinned as he saw the distant figures of two Spacemen coming across the field toward the ship. She could take care of explanations, until he got back with the doc. And while they had the right to go aboard, he knew the Spacemen here wouldn't

—there was still enough fear that space chills were contagious. When the doctor was working on her, he could remove the tricks on the thermostat.

And then let her yelp when the medico said she had nothing but blue funk from plain fear of carrying plutonium to Pluto. They'd pull her back Earthside, and he'd get someone else to carry on the rest of the trip with him—someone junior to him!

Then, as he crossed to the other side of the hill, it hit him: drowsiness, like a numbing drug poured into his veins. . . . He was getting groggier by the minute as he fought down toward the doctor's little dome. He felt someone helping him inside the dome, and then he collapsed.

"Drunk," he heard a man's heavy voice say. But he couldn't protest.

It seemed only moments later when the voice came again, repeating, "Drunk."

"Yeah." It was a woman's voice. "Yeah, scared of the Pluto hop. Lee had a lot of trouble with him. How's he now?"

"About ready to come to. I shot enough stimulant into him."

A door opened and shut then, and Mark opened his eyes, with an effort. But his head was clearing rapidly now. And it was a Spacewoman who stood there.

She looked at him in disgusted silence as he staggered to a wash basin and began ducking his head. When he was finished and fully clothed, he started out the nearest door, but she motioned to another. It was a back exit, and he noticed that she stuck to dimly lighted ways, still moving in silence. Finally she swung around.

"All right, I suppose I'll have to get used to you. I'm Pat Runyon. I run the satellite freight here—and from now on, brother, you're my helper. It's tough—you'll wish you were back on the Pluto hop—but you'll run it with me. And you won't go running to a doctor before I can open the port whenever we land, either. Give me those lieutenant bars!"

"Eh?"

"You heard me. Message from Earth to demote you when Lee got authority to replace you with my helper—a nice guy, *he* was, too.

Then they stick me with you for the rest of his contract. Well, stop staring at me, you'll get to know me in three years. But, brother, don't get cold feet on me. I'm not soft-hearted like Lee. I can't stand a yellow Spaceman! Here, she told me to give you this."

It was a little bundle of wires and relays, with his watch in the middle of it. He looked at it slowly. Then he looked up at the sky where Pluto should be, thinking of three long, back-breaking years ahead of him . . . three years, to give Lee Tanming plenty of time to laugh about the way she'd ground a raw kid's face into the dust—time to tell the story of that kid's clumsy trick with a thermostat, and her own cleverness with the cognac, until it grew stale—time enough even to forget the thing had ever happened.

But Mark knew that he wouldn't forget.

The same slow, bitter surge of hatred was in Mark Tayowa three years later as he dropped the freighter down, unconscious of the dozen gravities that were hitting her deck. It burned in his eyes as he passed from Spaceman's bar to hotel and on to another city. Nobody laughed at him now—long. He had chain-lightning reactions now, and muscle sheaths that almost rang when hit; he also had his lieutenant's bars back and the right to name his own next job, but those were unimportant. What counted was that he had three months' free time coming.

It took him just three weeks to track her down. She wasn't Lee Tanming, any more; she was Mrs. Ivan Aiello. Interestingly enough, Aiello was the man she'd picked up from Titan to replace him—and he was currently off to Mercury, which left things nicely uncomplicated. Mark smiled thinly and ran his tongue over his lips.

He was vaguely grateful to the builders of his race, who'd put no nonsense about chivalry into his makeup. As it was, he could beat hell out of her and enjoy every minute of it.

He punched the bell, noting that this community system for the Spacemen beat the old crèche and community halls in every way. The houses were neat, the yards attractive, and here and there the skinny, big-eyed children seemed happier and healthier.

Then someone threw open the door, and he looked up to see a Spacewoman standing there. He blinked, and changed the words in

his head. Not a Spacewoman . . . a Space angel. She was unmistakably of his race—her height, just under his own; the hint of the Oriental in her black eyes and ivory skin; her slender frame. But there was nothing angular about her. She glowed. She was utterly, disarmingly beautiful.

She frowned at his stare, and then suddenly laughed. "Mark!" she said. "Mark Tayowa. And how wonderful you're looking! Pat must have done you good. Come in, let me get you some coffee." She paused, stricken by a sudden thought. "You're not mad any more, are you? Here, Herbie, get that top out of your mouth. And you, Hank, stop pulling Fido's tail. Meet the twin brats, Mark."

Mark followed her in, still dazed. It *couldn't* be Lee. He remembered the scrawny, neuter figure as well as if he'd had her picture pasted into his helmet these long three years. He started forward, then stopped as she came out of the kitchen, carrying cups and a pot of coffee, and looking completely domestic.

For want of anything else to do, he sat down and tried awkwardly to look interested in the twins. But they were normal enough Spaceman children. And she still had that glow that drew his eyes to her.

"You're beautiful," he said finally, and his voice was harsh. "I didn't recognize you."

"Oh, that!" She laughed at him. "You, Herbie. Stop it! Just wait'll your father comes back from Mercury. He'll give it to you. Mark—you didn't expect me to stay neuter after the change, did you? Silly kid! I'll bet you never saw a Spacewoman over thirty-five before, did you? Though Pat Runyon must be about thirty-four, come to think of it. We—well, we develop."

It was too magnificent an understatement; Mark couldn't think of any way to handle it. He stood up slowly, awkwardly, feeling like a fool.

"Oh, come on, you're not mad? I've thought about it lots of times. (*Her-bie!*) I was so damn mad at having to quit space to be some Spaceman's wife. I used to have the craziest ideas—I actually hated the idea of going through puberty, at my age. . . . And you were an awful infant. I've often wondered what happened to you, you know. Ivan and I've had more fun guessing about that."

He nodded. "Yeah. I had fun, too. I guess maybe I'm still a little green around the ears."

"No-o." She considered him, smiling. "No, Mark. You've grown up. Mm-hmm. (Hank, let the dog *alone!*) But sit down, Mark, have some coffee. For old time's sake. We've got a lot to talk over, haven't we? (*Herbie!*) And I'm awfully lonesome—Ivan won't be home for another week."

Mark put his hands in his pockets slowly, and turned to the door. He took them out again, looked at Lee thoughtfully. Then he stared down at the two children. His shoulders drooped as he thrust his fists deep into his pockets.

She could never stand three gravities now, judging by the soft femininity of her.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Like to, but I've got to report back. Just thought I'd drop in, say hello."

"Oh, but Mark . . . (Hank, if you don't stop that!) Mark . . ."

But he was already down the steps, moving toward the waiting cab, letting her voice die out behind him.

Three years of sweating, driving his body until it ached every night, goading Pat Runyon to throw the book at him, picking a fight with every Spaceman he ran into . . . and now a soft, female form and a couple of kids had made it all useless. He doubled up a fist, trying to imagine Lee's neck inside his grasp. But it wouldn't come as a picture now—the old straight neck with its boyish tendons was gone, and the softly rounded throat he'd seen wouldn't replace it.

He cursed. "Take me to the nearest bar," he ordered the driver curtly.

Then slowly he reconsidered. "Make it the spaceport. And step on it."

He saw the driver throw him an odd look, but he didn't care what Normals thought now. There was still time to ask for his old job back, out on Titan, freighting around the satellites. He took a deep, slow breath and leaned back against the cushions.

In another year, Pat Runyon would be thirty-five—and the change would begin. Pat wasn't a bad person, come to think of it. Not bad at all. A good person to know. . . .

by H. B. Hickey

LIKE A BIRD, LIKE A FISH

Against the incredible complexity of the alien ship from yesterday, Earth had only the faith of Father Vincent — and the devious simplicity of Pablo. . . .

WHEN the priest came over the brow of the hill and looked down into the hollow and saw the great machine and the things that swarmed around it, his stomach lurched and he fell down on his knees and crossed himself. The villagers did the same.

"In nomine patris, et filii, et spiritus sancti," the priest murmured.

"Father," the villagers said. "Do not go down there."

"Who then will go?" he asked, lifting his skirts and preparing to descend.

"But they are plainly of the Devil! We will bring guns and send to the city for cannon, and—"

The priest smiled. "If they are truly of Satan, what good are guns and cannon?"

Very gently he removed their restraining hands. Clutching his cross before him, he half clambered, half slid down into the hollow. The things around the machine stopped what they were doing and he could tell they were watching him.

There was a great fear in the heart of the priest, but with the help of the cross and his faith he fought it down.

"In the name of our Lord, what are you?" he demanded.

There was no reply.

"From where do you come?" he asked.

He could feel something probing at his mind, feeling around his question. *Where are you from?* In his mind were all the possibilities, all the seas and the continents and the planets. And beyond those the galaxies and the universes.

The thing that probed his mind rejected all the possibilities there.

"Not *where,*" came the thought. *"When."*

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"I do not understand," the priest said.

"This is the world of space," the thought came. "You live in the world of space, of places. In moving across space, you create time.

"We live in the world of time. We move across time to create space."

"I do not understand."

"No matter. Your *yesterday* and our *now* lie across each other. The machine brought us through the wall."

There is no end to God's wonders, the priest thought. "Welcome," he said aloud.

"At what point in space are we?" came the question. "Where?"

"In our world? In Mexico. In a far corner of Guadalajara. It is a simple village, and I am Father Vincent, the priest."

They saw Guadalajara and Mexico and the village and the people, everything that was in the priest's mind. There was nothing capable of harming them, nothing to fear.

Only one concept in the priest's mind was not tangible. They tried to see it but it remained nebulous.

"Our machine does not move through your space," the thought came. "According to our theory it should function, but it does not. We entered space and found ourselves here. Now we cannot move."

"Obviously something is broken, or not working properly," the priest said. He knew Latin and several other languages and a goodly amount of astronomy, but mechanical things were a mystery to him.

"Pablo could probably fix it," he said. Pablo can fix anything."

"Who is Pablo?"

"A farmer. But God has given him this gift of mechanics."

Again God. This was the thing they could not see in the priest's mind, the nebulous concept.

"Perhaps God will come himself to fix it."

Father Vincent was shocked. And then he realized that these things were ignorant of the Lord. And he realized that into his hands had children of darkness come, and that through him salvation might be brought to them.

It was an honor and an opportunity so great that he almost fell to his knees again in thankfulness.

"Do not fear," he said. "Pablo will fix your machine."

And he told them about Pablo. How since Pablo was a boy he had this wonderful gift; how he had been able to repair the first automobile he had ever seen; how without training he had been able to take a fine watch apart, fashion replacement parts and make it work better than new. In short, how Pablo could make anything work, no matter how simple or complex.

"It is as if his untrained mind sees into the very soul of mechanical things. No, never fear. Simply tell Pablo how it is *supposed* to work, and he will make it do so."

He felt their rejection of this statement.

"If we ourselves, who devised and constructed the machine, cannot make it function, how can this Pablo?"

The priest shrugged. "Does a flower know the Divine laws by which it grows? But it grows. So with Pablo."

"Then bring him."

There was a tone of command in the thought which struck a warning note in Father Vincent's mind. But he tucked up his skirts and climbed out of the hollow and asked one of the villagers to run and fetch Pablo. "Tell him it is urgent."

"Listen, Father," they begged. "These things are evil. Let us get guns. The brush here is dry. We can set fire to it."

"How can you have such terrible thoughts? They are different from us, but still children of God. Now go."

While the villager ran to get Pablo, the priest stayed down in the hollow, alone with the things from the machine. The rest of the villagers hovered about the rim.

"They are simple people," Father Vincent explained. "When they saw this machine materialize out of nothingness here, they thought you were devils, and they ran for me."

Devils. This too was a concept that was not tangible.

"Are you at war with these devils?" came the thought.

"Always. Always," the priest sighed.

He told them something about the world in which they found themselves. In turn they told him a few things about the stratum of time in which they lived, which he found wondrous.

"And tell me," he said, "do you have not God? To whom do you pray? Who is the ruler of your world?"

"*We* are the rulers of our world."

The answer struck him like a cold wind. "Are there many of you?"

They saw in his mind the number of the people on Earth. "Your space could not hold all of us."

And then, because they could see in his mind that there were no weapons Earth could use against them, they told him how they had conquered their stratum of time, and let him see the manner in which they had done it.

And finally, with nothing left to conquer, they had turned their minds outside their own world. One of them, such as would be called a scientist, had theorized that a spatial world must exist, and that it would be a coefficient of their time world. So the machine had been built.

Now that the experiment had proved successful, and as soon as they could move through space also, they would go back and build machines.

Father Vincent was sorry that the villagers had called him. They should have set the fire. But it was too late.

"You will come in peace?" he asked, his voice beginning to tremble. "You will do no harm?"

But he knew the question was futile. They would come to Earth as they had come to all of their own world.

He clutched the cross tightly and prayed the Lord to have mercy on the children of the spatial world.

It would not even take a major miracle. Suppose Pablo were not

found? Not too much to hope. Then this machine would not be repaired and there would be no more of them.

But that hope was dashed. Manuel Ortiz stuck his head over the rim and called down: "Father! I have talked with Pablo. He will come. Mañana."

"Tomorrow?" the thought came. The priest nodded.

At least one day of grace. Not much, but something. A runner could be dispatched and within a single day help might be on its way. Guns, soldiers, planes, bombs.

Why, he wondered, could not these abominations have materialized near a village with telephone or telegraph? But even so, a day. In the meantime he might temporize, soothe.

"Perhaps you are in need of food, water—" he said.

"Food," came the thought. "Yes, food."

Some of the things started up the slope, moving jerkily and unsurely. In a panic, the villagers scattered in all directions. But an invisible wall seemed to rise in their paths and they stopped short. They were trapped, as though in a cage of clear glass.

Manuel Ortiz screamed as the things pressed around him. He fought, still screaming, as they lifted him and bore him down the slope.

"In the name of Heaven!" Father Vincent shouted, and flung himself forward gravely. "Stop!"

Slimy things pressed him back. His struggles, his calls on Divine help, were of no use. Manuel Ortiz vanished into the great machine.

"Now go!" the thought came. There was nothing for the priest to do but obey.

All that night the candles burned in the church in the village. Father Vincent prayed for the soul of Manuel Ortiz and for all the souls in the village, and beyond that for all humanity.

For there was apparently no hope.

He had sent men, the fleetest and the strongest, by every possible road to get help, to warn the world of this incarnate evil. But around the village had sprung up a great invisible wall, and no man could penetrate it.

In the morning the priest was still in the church, sleepless, when

he heard shouts in the street. He ran out, his old eyes blinking at the strong sunlight, and saw some of the things approaching. Otherwise the street was clear.

"Where is Pablo?" the question came.

Closing the doors of the church before he answered, so that not even the awful odor of these abominations could enter the sacred precincts, he said, "I suppose he will come. Too soon, alas."

"Send another to get him."

There was nothing he could do. Going to the house of Avilla, the shoemaker, he found them all all cowering in corners. After much persuasion Avilla's oldest boy agreed to go.

In an hour the boy returned. He stood several hundred feet away and shouted:

"Pablo will come!"

"When?" was the thought.

"When?" the priest shouted.

"Mañana!" the boy yelled. and scampered away out of sight.

Again tomorrow.

"You do not understand," Father Vincent said. "Pablo is a man who will not be hurried."

One of the abominations pointed an instrument at the adobe shack of Gomez, the leather worker, and it was as if an earthquake had struck the house. It quivered, it shook, it tottered and fell. There were screams from inside and then silence and only a pile of grey dust where the house had stood.

"I will go myself to bring Pablo," the priest said.

He went down the dusty road, reciting the litany for the dead, tears streaming from his eyes.

Pablo lay under a tree. He was a tall young man, wide in the shoulders and with incredible hands. When he saw the priest coming he rose up on his elbows and smiled at him.

Many times Father Vincent had urged him to go away to the big cities where his great gift could be enhanced. He could have become world-renowned, a famous man.

"Bah," Pablo has snorted. "Who can stand the filthy cities? Listen, Padre, I can drink a gallon of wine without getting drunk, I

can eat a dead horse without sickening. I have my Carla. I am happy. Had God wanted me to be a city man he would have arranged me to be born there, would he not?"

It was really too bad that Pablo had not gone away to the city.

"Pablo—" the priest began.

Pablo cut him off before he could say anything further.

"Padre, rest yourself and hear the thing I have been thinking."

"Pablo—"

"No, listen. Last night, you see, I was lying under this very tree and watching the heavens. And it came to me that all of this above me was like a great machine, moving through the sky. And then it came to me, watching how the various stars were arranged, that they were not in good balance. And I thought that God was not much of a mechanic."

"Do not blaspheme, Pablo," the priest begged.

"No. Wait," Pablo said. "And then it came to me that all this I could see might be only a small part of a much larger machine, and that if only I knew how it was supposed to work I would see that other and further stars all moved in perfect harmony with these."

He stirred, sighing deeply. "And it came to me what a truly divine mechanic our Lord really is."

"We cannot fathom His designs," he priest murmured.

Pablo nodded and his eyes grew brighter. "But do you know, Padre, that it is when I look at my Carla that I see most clearly how perfectly the Lord fashions."

"Pablo!"

"No, listen." He twisted around.

"When Carla moves her arm, her whole body balances with the motion. When she moves her lovely throat, so, there is a counterbalance, so."

Pablo rose to his feet, quite excited now. "At first I thought, as with the heavens, that *I* could have fashioned better. For instance, Carla's arm. I would have put the fulcrum closer, for better lifting power."

He laughed aloud. "But then from shoulder to elbow she would have been too long! I tell you, Padre, the Lord is the only perfect mechanic. And my Carla is his noblest work."

Getting up on his feet and stretching languidly, Pablo smiled at the priest.

"And now, I suppose it is about the strange machine and the strange visitors, eh? Well, I will fix whatever is necessary."

"No," Father Vincent quavered. "No, you must not!"

He was too late. Pablo looked past him and said suddenly, *"Mother of God!"*

On the inside it was truly wonderful, the machine. Pablo stared at the maze of equipment, unbelievably polished and shining and beautiful.

"Ah," he sighed, and ran his hand over the metal surfaces. He stuck his head out and called, "Padre! Come see this marvelous thing!"

"Pablo!" the priest called.

"Can you make it work?" came the query.

"I can make anything work," Pablo snorted.

"Pablo!" the priest begged.

The things came at the old man and he defied them, his cross held before him, shouting at Pablo to come out. There was angry intent in the air as the things came close to Father Vincent.

"Hey!" Pablo shouted. "Let him alone! Touch one hair and I refuse to fix this machine!"

There was no doubt at all that Pablo meant what he said. The things retreated, leaving Father Vincent unharmed.

"Tell me," Pablo said, "what all this is supposed to do."

They told hi mabout the strata of time and space, like streams flowing in layers, and how this machine was to go from one stream to another. They explained fully the theory.

And then they explained the intended functions of the various parts.

Pablo listened closely. With abstract concepts he was lost, but with operational concepts he was truly a genius. Everything became related and clear as crystal.

"Ah," he said. "So. The power comes from here along here, and this moves you along the surface of the stream. And then you go down *into* the stream."

His hand described a dive. "So! Yes. But now you are within the stream you cannot move, the power does not drive through. Eh?"

It seemed so. Theoretically, the machine should work. Practically, it did not. Why it should work in one way and not in another, they didn't know.

"Plainly," Pablo grunted. "Or you would not need me. You are like men who catch fish with their net, but wonder why it will not hold water to drink."

"You can fix it so it will move through your space?"

"Naturally. I will take these parts here, and these, to the blacksmith's shop and alter them." He moved off to join the priest. "Mañana. I will do it tomorrow."

"You will fix it now. And we will watch you closely while you do."

"Pablo," the priest said, "we have been granted these few minutes. I beg you not to repair this evil machine."

"The machine is beautiful," Pablo demurred. "Those who built it may be evil, but the machine, no."

"You must refuse!"

"If I refuse, they will kill you, Padre."

"I am not afraid to die, my son."

"Nor I. But further than that, what they have done to the house of Gomez they will do to the whole village."

"Even so," the priest agreed. "The village, and perhaps all the surrounding countryside. But if they cannot move from here they will eventually be detroyed."

He put his hand on Pablo's arm. "Innocent people will die, true, but the Lord will forgive us. What is one village against the whole world?"

"Nothing, were my Carla not in the village. She would die too."

Pablo scratched his head and thought awhile.

"No, to me it is equal, Padre. You have told me a sparrow is as much in the Lord's eyes as a thousand men. And to me there is as much perfection in my Carla as in all the universe."

"Please do not say such things, Pablo."

"I can't help it," Pablo told him. "I am a mechanic, not a priest. I see things as God gave me to see them."

"But later they will come back and Carla will die anyway. Don't you see that?"

Pablo shrugged. "Later. Who knows what will happen later? Meanwhile, we shall have kissed a good many times more."

He patted the priest's shoulder and said, "Come now, Padre. Give me your blessing."

Then he strode back to the great machine and looked full at the abominations before it.

"Understand, now," he said. "If I fix it the village must remain unharmed."

"Understood. Agreed."

But before he entered the great machine again there came the thought, heavy with menace: "We will test it, however."

"Naturally," Pablo said. "Have no fear. When it is done you will fly like birds."

In his wonderful hands tools and metals came to life, seeming to have minds of their own, so fast did they move, so unerringly. With not an excess stroke they were hammered, beaten, forged, bent, shaped, chiseled.

The sweat ran down Pablo's chest and his back and his arms. He shook the drops time and again from his face. But he did not take his eyes from what he was doing.

And finally, when everything was done, he carried it all back to the great machine. And when the last queerly-shaped part was back in place as he wanted it he straightened up, sighing.

"There," he said.

"It will work now?"

"Of course." And he went out to join the priest.

The things were all inside the machine now. There was a faint hum. Slowly it lifted from the hollow. It swung left, then right. It moved swiftly now, smoothly.

"It is a beautiful machine," Pablo sighed. "Look at it, Padre!"

Father Vincent closed his eyes. "I had hoped that somehow you had fixed it so it would explode."

"Explode?" Pablo snorted. "They are no fools, Padre. They could never understand exactly how I fixed it, but they knew it was so."

The priest opened his eyes again. He and Pablo watched the machine spiral upward.

And then suddenly it was gone. It had vanished.

"Pray, Pablo," the priest said. "Pray that you may be forgiven."

"For what?" Pablo said absently. He was still watching the place in the sky where the machine had been.

"They are gone. Back to their own. And when they return it will be the end."

"Bah," Pablo said. "They will not return." He shook his head. "But really, Padre, it was a beautiful machine."

"Not return? You mean you did not really fix it?" Father Vincent clutched at Pablo, shaking him.

"Certainly I fixed it," Pablo said. "You saw it fly, didn't you?"

"Then what?"

"Then nothing. It is a wonderful machine, but not a perfect machine. Only God could make a perfect machine."

And then, seeing that the priest did not understand, Pablo put his strong young arm around the old man's shoulders and spoke to him kindly.

"Their trouble, Padre, is that they do not know that God is a mechanic."

"Please, Pablo."

"I do not blaspheme, Padre. Listen, it is like I said about my Carla. If the Lord had made the leverages of her back so that she could move more strongly in one direction, then she could not move so gracefully in the other. This would be poor mechanics, of which He is not capable."

The priest groaned. "Please, stop with the leverages. Speak so I can understand."

"I *am* speaking so you can understand!" Pablo shouted, growing excited. With an effort he calmed himself. "Forgive me, Padre."

He tried again. "Look, Padre, it is like a bird. A bird is made by God to fly swiftly through the air. A bird skims swiftly over the surface of the water. You see this?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Now, the bird sees a fish deep down in the water. The fish moves very slowly compared to the bird. So the bird thinks

that surely it can seize this slow little fish. And it dives down into the water, very deep. Can it seize the fish?"

"No."

"Of course not. Because the very thing which makes the bird able to fly swiftly through the air, that very construction also makes it impossible for the bird to swim deep in water. God has fashioned things so that each works in its own way only."

He sighed. "So. Thus with the machine. Before, it could fly through their Time, but not through our Space. Now it is fixed so it flies through Space."

"But still through Time also!" the priest said. "It vanished!"

"A bird dives *into* the water, too," Pablo reminded him. "But that does not mean it will swim."

He sighed again. "What part of Time were they from, Padre?"

"Yesterday," Father Vincent said.

"I do not think they will reach yesterday. Maybe tomorrow, but not yesterday." Pablo laughed. "Yes, maybe mañana, Padre."

They walked back toward town together, each lost in his own thoughts. After a while, just before they reached the village, Pablo halted. "I have been thinking, Padre," he said.

"Of what, my son?"

"Of Carla and myself. But especially of Carla."

"So?"

"So I think Carla and I should be married. At once."

"I have been hoping for this a long time," the priest said, smiling. "We will arrange it." He laughed aloud. "Mañana."

"Not mañana," Pablo said. "Not this. *Today*, Padre."

Tilt!

Two University of Washington professors have come forward with a solemn warning that pinball playing—like alcohol, nembutal and biting the fingernails—can be habit-forming. The professors were unanimous up to this point, but differed when it came to recommending that the nickel machines be banned. One for, one against. Neither thought there is need yet for a "Pinballers Anonymous"—though both recommended psychotherapy in extreme cases. Anybody got a nickel?

by
Lord Dunsany

THE OLD BROWN COAT

The thing was immensely valuable; but why — and how?

MY FRIEND, Mr. Douglas Ainslie, tells me that Sir James Barrie once told him this story. The story, or rather the fragment, was as follows.

A man strolling into an auction somewhere abroad, I think it must have been France, for they bid in francs, found they were selling old clothes. And following some idle whim he soon found himself bidding for an old coat. A man bid against him, he bid against the man. Up and up went the price till the old coat was knocked down to him for twenty pounds. As he went away with the coat he saw the other bidder looking at him with an expression of fury.

That's as far as the story goes. But how, Mr. Ainslie asked me, did the matter develop, and why that furious look? I at once made enquiries at a reliable source and have ascertained that the man's name was Peters, who thus oddly purchased the coat, and that he took it to the Rue de Rivoli, to a hotel where he lodged, from the little low, dark auction room by the Seine in which he concluded the bargain. There he examined it, off and on, all day and much of the next morning, a light brown overcoat with tails, without discovering any excuse, far less a reason, for having spent twenty pounds on so

worn a thing. And late next morning to his sitting room looking out on the Gardens of the Tuileries the man with the furious look was ushered in.

Grim he stood, silent and angry, till the guiding waiter went. Not till then did he speak, and his words came clear and brief, welling up from deep emotions:

"How did you dare to bid against me?"

His name was Santiago. And for many moments Peters found no excuse to offer, no apology, nothing in extenuation. Lamely at last, weakly, knowing his argument to be of no avail, he muttered something to the intent that Mr. Santiago could have outbid him.

"No," said the stranger. "We don't want all the town in this. This is a matter between you and me." He paused, then added in his fierce, curt way: "A thousand pounds, no more."

Almost dumbly Peters accepted the offer and, pocketing the thousand pounds that was paid him, and apologizing for the inconvenience he had unwittingly caused, tried to show the stranger out. But Santiago strode swiftly on before him, taking the coat, and was gone.

There followed between Peters and his second thoughts another long afternoon of bitter reproaches. Why ever had he let go so thoughtlessly a garment that so easily fetched a thousand pounds? And the more he brooded on this the more clearly did he perceive that he had lost an unusual opportunity of a first class investment of a speculative kind. He knew men perhaps better than he knew materials; and, though he could not see in that old brown coat the value of so much as a thousand pounds, he saw far more than that in the man's eager need for it. An afternoon of brooding over lost opportunities led to a night of remorse, and scarcely had day dawned when he ran to his sitting-room to see if he still had safe the card of Santiago. And there was the neat and perfumed *carte de visite* with Santiago's Parisian address in the corner.

That morning he sought him out, and found Santiago seated at a table with chemicals and magnifying glasses beside him examining, as it lay spread wide before him, the old brown coat. And Peters fancied he wore a puzzled air.

They came at once to business. Peters was rich and asked Santiago to name his price, and that small dark man admitted financial

straits, and so was willing to sell for thirty thousand pounds. A little bargaining followed, the price came down and the old brown coat changed hands once more, for twenty thousand pounds.

Let any who may be inclined to doubt my story understand that in the City, as any respectable company promoter will tell them, twenty thousand pounds is invested almost daily with less return for it than an old tail coat. And, whatever doubts Mr. Peters felt that day about the wisdom of his investment, there before him lay that tangible return, that something that may be actually fingered and seen, which is so often denied to the investor in gold mines and other Selected Investments. Yet as the days wore on and the old coat grew no younger, nor any more wonderful, nor the least useful, Peters began once more to doubt his astuteness. Before the week was out his doubts had grown acute. And then one morning, Santiago returned. A man, he said, had just arrived from Spain, a friend unexpected all of a sudden in Paris, from whom he might borrow money: and would Peters resell the coat for thirty thousand pounds?

It was then that Peters, seeing his opportunity, cast aside the pretense that he had maintained for so long of knowing something about the mysterious coat, and demanded to know its properties. Santiago swore that he knew not, and repeatedly swore the same by many sacred names; but when Peters as often threatened not to sell, Santiago at last drew out a thin cigar and, lighting it and settling himself in a chair, told all he knew of the coat.

He had been on its tracks for weeks with his suspicions growing all the time that it was no ordinary coat; and at last he had run it to earth in that auction room but would not bid for it more than twenty pounds for fear of letting everyone into the secret. What the secret was he swore he did not know, but this much he knew all along, that the weight of the coat was absolutely nothing; and he had discovered by testing it with acids that the brown stuff of which the coat was made was neither cloth nor silk nor any known material, and would neither burn nor tear. He believed it to be some undiscovered element. And the properties of the coat which he was convinced were marvelous he felt sure of discovering within another week by means of experiments with his chemicals. Again he offered thirty thousand pounds, to be paid within two or three days if all went

well. And then they started haggling together as business men will.

And all the morning went by over the gardens of the Tuileries and the afternoon came on, and only by two o'clock they arrived at an understanding, on a basis, as they called it, of thirty thousand guineas. And the old tail coat was brought out and spread on the table, and they examined it together and chatted about its properties, all the more friendly for their strenuous argument. And Santiago was rising up to go, and Peters pleasantly holding out his hand, when a step was heard on the stair. It echoed up to the room, the door opened. And an elderly laboring man came stumping in. He walked with difficulty, almost like a bather who has been swimming and floating all the morning and misses the buoyancy of the water when he has come to land. He stumped up to the table without speaking and there at once caught sight of the old brown coat.

"Why," he said, "that be my old coat."

And without another word he put it on. In the fierce glare of his eyes as he fitted on that coat, carefully fastening the buttons, buttoning up the flap of a pocket here, unbuttoning one there, neither Peters nor Santiago found a word to say. They sat there wondering how they had dared to bid for that brown tail coat, how they had dared to buy it, even to touch it, they sat there silent without a single excuse. And with no word more the old laborer stumped across the room, opened wide the double window that looked on the Tuileries gardens and, flashing back over his shoulder one look that was full of scorn, stumped away up through the air at an angle of forty degrees.

Peters and Santiago saw him bear to his left from the window; passing diagonally over the Rue de Rivoli and over a corner of the Tuileries gardens; they saw him clear the Louvre, and thence they dumbly watched him still slanting upwards, stepping out with a firmer and more confident stride as he dwindled and dwindled away with his old brown coat.

Neither spoke till he was no more than a speck in the sky far away over Paris going South Eastwards.

"Well I am blowed," said Peters.

But Santiago sadly shook his head. "I knew it was a good coat," he said. "I *knew* it was a good coat."

by Poul Anderson

THE ACOLYTES

Beyond the green, smiling face that Nerthus showed to men was the dark other — the alien face that is death to see!

THE VERY first day he was there, Aunt Edith said to him, "Now, Peter, be sure not to leave the grounds alone."

"Why not?" he asked, suddenly wondering if this was going to be as much fun as he had thought. It had been a sort of disappointing trip from Sol, days and days locked inside the metal walls of the spaceship. And the steward had taken his mother seriously and watched him so carefully that it had been just like being back in school. And now this—

"It's just a matter of common sense, Pete," said Uncle Gunnar. "We don't know enough about this planet yet. You could get into trouble. Sure, we'll go everywhere you want, but not alone. Together. No space explorer who rushes off by himself on a new world and gets in a scrape that his friends have to pull him out of, is a hero. He's just a bloody fool. You've got more brains than that. First

chance I get, I'll show you through the woods—and I'll take my gun along."

That made it different. Wilson Pete was suddenly glad all over to be here—here, on a frontier planet, on his uncle's farm. And Uncle Gunnar was an old explorer himself, he'd been all over the Galaxy before he settled down on Nerthus. He was a huge man, with bright blue eyes in a tanned strong face. His hair and beard were red as fire. And he knew enough to call a fellow "Pete" instead of that sissy "Peter." When you're going on eleven, you like to be talked to man to man.

"Sure," said Pete. "Sure, I'm old enough to know that."

"Fine," said Uncle Gunnar. "After all, this is a pretty big place we've got. You'll have quite a bit to see before you want to explore the woods or the hills. How about a look around now?"

"Oh, that can wait," said Aunt Edith. "You must be tired from your trip, Peter. Don't you want to take a nap first?"

"I'm not tired," said Pete. "It was an easy trip."

He had been a little tired when the spaceship landed at Stellamont, the only city on Nerthus. It was a small place too, just a cluster of buildings stuck on a broad green plain, not much to look at. But Uncle Gunnar had been there to meet him. They'd gone into the noisy dimness of the *Spaceman's Haven,* where he'd had a glass of ambrosite while Uncle Gunnar had a beer, and he'd met a dozen men he only remembered dimly, the men who were pioneering out among the stars. Then they'd gone to the aircar and flown to the farm.

It had been a long ride through a lonely sky, hundreds of kilometers of emptiness rolling beneath them. Not really emptiness—there were the hills and forests and lakes, a seacoast glimpsed from afar, broad valleys with long shadows sliding across them. But no men. Wind and sunlight and murmuring rivers, but no men.

Nerthus was almost disappointingly Earthlike, no moving mountains or columns of fire or glittering alien cities, just the wild green land slipping away beneath a humming aircar. But Uncle Gunnar made it sound interesting enough as he talked.

"There's tomorrow in this world, it belongs to the future," he said. "Man has only been here a few years, there aren't many of us yet.

but more are coming in every month. It's going to be one of the great planets of the Galaxy, and we're in on the beginning."

"Aren't there any natives?" asked Pete.

"Not a one. Nerthus is one of the few planets where a man can live without artificial help and have the place all to himself to boot." Uncle Gunnar sighed. "But sometimes I wish there were natives. It'd make matters a lot easier for us."

"How so?" asked Pete. "They couldn't work any better'n your machines, could they?"

"No, though Cosmos knows I could do with a little extra help. Edith and Tobur and I have all we can do to manage a farm the size of ours. But it's a question mainly of ecology. Nerthus may be like Earth basically, and even in rather fine details of biology and chemistry, but still there are some two billion years of independent evolution on the two worlds. Naturally there are differences—and as yet we don't know just what all those differences are.

"Well, just take the obvious examples. How do we know what native foods we can eat and what is poisonous to us? We just have to try everything out first, by chemical analysis or by using Terrestrial animals. Then there are the native animals—which of them can we tame and use, and which are hopeless? The natives could tell us a lot of things we need to know.

"And eventually we have to understand the way the whole planet works, and fit ourselves into it. Little things like the exact composition of the soil, the bacteria in it, the insects that fertilize some plants, the spectral distribution of sunlight—all that will make a big difference in the success of agriculture. We haven't had too much success so far in growing Terrestrial plants on Nerthus, for precisely that reason. They're working in the labs at Stellamont, developing new varieties of staple plants like corn and potatoes—Nerthusian varieties, that will fit in here. It'll be done, too, but it's a big job and it'll take time. Meanwhile, we colonists have to make out the best we can."

Pete nodded. Uncle Gunnar was fun to talk to, though it was hard to follow him sometimes.

Anyway, the trip from Stellamont had been so interesting that Pete wasn't tired any more. He was all on fire to see the place.

"Well, it isn't long till supper," said Aunt Edith. "I suppose you menfolk might as well loaf around for a while."

"Come on, then," said Uncle Gunnar, and he and Pete went outside.

The house was low and white, with a high, peaked roof—on Earth it would have been funny, it looked so ancient, but here it blended with the trees and the sky and the big open fields. As you came out on the front porch, you saw a broad space of turf and wooded clumps, flowers nodding in the breeze, the tall forest beyond. On one side the fields began, rolling away toward far blue hills, on the other side and toward the rear the lawn sloped off to the farm buildings.

As they walked toward the barn, someone stepped out of it and approached them. Someone—no, something. Pete caught his breath as he saw that it was an alien.

He looked like a short, squat man with very wide shoulders and long arms, but he was completely hairless and his skin was blue. A round, flat-nosed, earless, wide-mouthed head sat on a short thick neck. He wore the usual pouched belt, as well as baggy pants around his bowed legs, and nothing else. Huge eyes that were pools of blackness gleamed at them as he came up and smiled.

"Hello," he said. His voice was deep and heavy, with a funny sort of accent that no human throat could have had.

"Hello, Tobur," said Uncle Gunnar. "This is my nephew, Wilson Pete, who's going to stay with us awhile. You remember I told you about him. His father is an engineer on Earth who's been assigned to a project on Sol VIII. The planet not being fit to live on, Pete's folks have sent him here for the time being. Pete, this is Tobur of Javartenan, my old batman and now the hired man."

"P-pleased to meet you," said Pete uncertainly.

"Likewise, I say," grinned Tobur with an alarming flash of teeth. "How you like here, huh?"

"I—all right, I guess," answered Pete.

"Can you do this?" asked Tobur. He jumped up into the air—*way* into the air—clicked his heels and turned a somersault on the way down, and landed on his hands.

"N-no. Goshell, no."

"Then I winner," said Tobur. "Is custom on Javartenan for winner give prize to loser. Winner pay for glory, you see. So I give you prize. Here, take." He pulled a small knife out of one pouch. "Knife belong Queen of Astafogartistan once, I take after hard battle. Brings luck. Worshiped by natives as god. Keep for souvenir, Pete."

"Thanks! Thanks a googol!" Pete held the knife close. "Thanks, Tobur!"

The alien clapped him on the back. "Is nothing. Friends give presents, no? I have many other souvenirs of battles, sure."

Presently the three of them went on toward the barn. Uncle Gunnar explained to Pete: "Tobur and I were together for many years. When I finally decided to settle down, he still followed me. We can at least gas over old times."

"But Cosmos, Uncle Gunnar, why did you stop exploring?"

"Oh—a man gets older, Pete. He's not quite up to it any more. And then I met your aunt and decided it was time I got a home of my own. Nerthus was wide open, it offered enough of a challenge for anyone. So we came here, and I've never regretted it."

They came into the cool dusk of the barn, where cows from Earth stood beside native bufoids. Going out the other door they emerged into a big corral where some of the six-legged, greenish-furred native "ponies" were kept.

"We've had pretty good luck taming those," said Uncle Gunnar. "It's handy. There isn't as much machinery available yet as we need, and they can substitute. Also, they can go places and do things that a car or tractor can't—into the woods, for instance."

He reached out and snagged the halter of one. "Here, Pete. I've been saving this one for you. He's yours."

A six-legged pony on an alien planet, an alien ex-spaceman and adventurer for a friend, a whole new world— Cosmos googolplex!

Pete rode around for a while, getting the feel of the animal. The middle pair of legs gave it a funny humping motion that was a little hard to get used to. They went down to look at the orchard and some of the pens, and glanced across the fence at the waving fields of avertigonite. From that plant came avertigon, the anti-space sickness drug, and it was Uncle Gunnar's chief money crop.

"But I'll be pretty busy when the harvest comes in," he said. "The neighbors—" he meant everyone within several hundred kilometers—"pool what machinery and labor they have to reap and thresh it, so I'll have to be away quite a bit. You and Tobur will have to look after Aunt Edith and the farm, Pete."

"We'll do that," promised Pete, swapping a glance with Tobur. The Javartenanian grinned back at him.

The sun was low in the west, filling the air with shining gold and slipping long blue shadows over the ground, when they heard Aunt Edith calling them to supper. "Let's go," said Tobur, smacking his lips, and waddling quickly ahead.

Something tinkled in the high grass, a ripple of little glass bells, sweet and laughing in the gentle sunset air. Pete had a glimpse of a green-furred small thing that skittered away from them, chiming and singing as it danced.

"What's *that?*" he asked, very softly.

Uncle Gunnar shrugged. "We call 'em tinklers," he said. "They're found everywhere hereabouts, making that noise. Don't ask me what they do for a living. Damn nuisance, I think."

Pete stared after the retreating tinkler. It gamboled off, stopping now and then to look after them, and the laughter of bells filled the quiet evening.

They had given him a room to himself, a big cool chamber at the rear of the house, and sent him to bed there not long after supper. He lay for a while thinking of all that there would be to do, thinking about his luck in having Thorleifsson Gunnar for an uncle, thinking about the way he would tell of all this when he got back to Earth. Pretty soon he dropped into a light doze, but it wasn't long before he woke up again and was thirsty.

For a little while he just lay there, feeling too lazy to get up for a drink. But that only made him more wide awake than before. He looked around the room; it was all black and white with moonglow, the ghostly curtains fluttered in the breeze, and he could hear the faint noises of the night murmuring out there.

Well, sunspots! He wanted some water bad. So he got up and walked across to the door. The floor was cool and hard under his

bare feet, and shadows slid around behind and in front of him, and the wind blew in a faint tingle of unearthly smells. Another world! You couldn't even see the sun of Nerthus from Sol's planets—and here he was!

He went quietly down the corridor toward the bathroom and got his drink. As he came out again, he noticed light coming from around the bend in the hall, from the living room, and he heard a low mutter of voices. His aunt and uncle must still be sitting up, talking.

It would be fun to sneak up and listen in, the way the Patrolman had listened in on the Scordians in that stereo. It'd be good practice for the time when he would be having adventures, and shoot, it wouldn't do any harm— He went very softly down the hall and stood just beyond the open living-room door.

"—I still don't think they should have done it," said Aunt Edith.

"Why not?" rumbled Uncle Gunnar's deep voice. "Cathy would naturally want to be with her husband, and you can't have kids along on that devil's planet. They had to send him somewhere, and this is a healthy sort of place for a youngster."

"Oh, Peter is a sweet boy—" Pete's ears burned—"and I'm glad to see him. But this planet healthy? I wonder!"

"What in the Galaxy could be dangerous here?"

"I don't know. That's just the trouble, I don't know. If we did, we could guard against it. But Nerthus is still too much a mystery, Gunnar. Diseases, maybe—"

"Edith, I've told you a million times that the probability of any local germ finding a congenial host in man is vanishingly small. Sure, they did have one epidemic here, of native origin, but that particular thing was soon licked. The chance that another organism can survive a metabolism as alien as ours is so slight that we've got a considerably better prospect of being hit by a meteorite."

"Well—wild animals—"

"Come now, sweetheart, you also know that potentially dangerous life forms have been eliminated around all our settlements. I haven't seen a large carnivore in the woods here for at least two years now." Uncle Gunnar got up and came across to where she sat; Pete could hear his slow heavy footsteps and feel the floor quivering ever so faintly under them. "Besides, Pete's under orders to stay on the farm

grounds, where even you will agree there's no danger. And Tobur will keep an eye on him too."

"Oh, I know it, Gunnar, I know it all. But why have all those other children vanished off farms? What became of them?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. Perhaps there are dangers in the woods that we don't know about. My guess is, their parents got careless and let them go off alone. That's not going to happen with Pete. Now for Cosmos' sake, honey, stop worrying—"

Pete stole back toward his room, not caring to listen any more. He felt a little mad about it—as if he couldn't take care of himself! But he'd obey orders like a good spaceman, if only to save the folks from worry and himself from a licking.

As he got back into the room, he heard a noise from outside. He went to the window and leaned out.

It was a strange, magic scene, a fairyland of streaming moonlight and whispering trees and unknown constellations. There were two moons in the sky, pouring their cold silver light down over the grass to glitter in the dew, throwing weird double shadows of trees. One moon was so close you could almost see it move, could almost see its shadows crawling like live things, as if the world stirred restlessly in its sleep. The stars flashed and gleamed high overhead, sprawling in new figures. Only the pale flood of the Milky Way looked the same.

The night murmured. Pete knew the nights of Earth and their noises, out in the silence far from man—buzz of insects, chirp of crickets, hoarse croaking of frogs, a million little sounds all blending into one great quiet voice. Nerthus had its language too, but it wasn't Earth's; all the tiny parts of it were different and they added up to a strange whisper, the voice of an alien world.

Insects were there, thrumming and humming. Something was singing, a sweet liquid trill running up and down the scale, and something else screamed harshly, far away in the woods and swamps. There was a far-off pattering like the rapid thunder of a small drum, there was a shrill scrape as of metal, there was brief maniac laughter, there was hooting and hissing and chuckling and bubbling, all at the very edge of hearing. And—something else—

Yes, there it came again. Pete remembered now, harked back to

the thing which had chimed and laughed at him in the sunset.

It came bobbing and dancing out of the shadows and the forest, jumping, bouncing, swatting after the elfin lamps of night-glowing insects, and a million little bells came with it. Pete listened, straining out the window, enchanted by the night and the music.

He couldn't see the tinkler very well. It was a dim whiteness in the shifting, tricky moonlight, a small thing that danced under his window and called to him to come out and play. But he could hear it, the bells came high and sweet now.

They were like silver sleigh-bells on a frosty night, like a sunlit rain-shower, like the laughter of young girls. It was a rush of chiming, a pizzicato on a string of glass, gay and joyous and drunken with life. *Come out, come out, come out*—come out and run in the moonlight with me!

"No," said Pete all at once, and yawned. He was sleepy. Some other time, maybe. Perhaps Tobur would come along—somehow, he didn't think the bells of Faerie would chime for Uncle Gunnar, but Tobur might understand.

After all, grownups thought the tinklers were just a nuisance. They came dancing around the house of nights and spoiled your sleep with their wistful laughter. You had to listen to them—

Tobur leaned back more comfortably against the wall of the shed. "—and there was I," he went on. "Spacesuit leaking, poison air and minus two hundred degrees all around, natives after me—"

"Gollikers!" whispered Pete.

They sat in the shade, letting dinner settle inside them while a hot early-afternoon sun danced and flimmered beyond and the air was drowsy with humming bugs. Tobur had another story to tell.

The being from Javartenan was always ready to drop what he was doing and talk to a fellow, always glad to make some little thing for you or show you how to do a job in the best and easiest way, letting you help him so you could learn. And he was even more fun to listen to than Uncle Gunnar, with his odd accent and his exciting stories. He'd told Pete a lot in the last few days.

Of course, when you considered how Uncle Gunnar had taken him from Javartenan as a servant to begin with, and how they'd

been together ever since, it was funny how many adventures he'd had all by himself, how many planets he'd been on that Uncle Gunnar never mentioned—but Cosmos, he was sure a fine story-teller and he wouldn't lie to a fellow.

"Well, what I do?" said Tobur now. "There I was, trapped 'gainst cliff of frozen nitrogen, spacesuit leaking, powerpack near gone, blaster 'most empty, and all those hundreds of natives coming up at me. What I do? I give up Sacred Jewel of Pashtu? Save my life that way?" He looked hard at Pete.

"Cosmos, what else could you do but surrender?" asked Pete, since that was the answer Tobur seemed to expect.

"And betray trust in me? Gō back on oath? Not Tobur! Die is little thing, small Pete, but honor much. Also, I began to have idea. I began thinking mighty hard there, you bet. I had Jewel to defend, near out of blaster charges, but still plenty brains, yes. I—"

"Tobur!"

The Javartenanian started guiltily as Uncle Gunnar's voice bellowed through the still air.

"Tobur! Where in the name of Valdaoth are you— Oh, there!" Uncle Gunnar came around the corner of the shed and saw them. His cold blue eyes flashed under his bristling red eyebrows.

"Loafing again, huh? I told you we had to get that bottom land fenced in before the harvest starts. Which means today. Where's the truck? What've you been doing besides sitting on your fat tail?"

"Been watching small Pete like you told me," said Tobur sulkily.

"Nothing to stop you working while you did, was there? Now get up and help me, or before Cosmos I'll bounce you out of here. Up!"

Tobur rose, scowling, and slouched into the shed. Uncle Gunnar lingered behind with Pete to whisper with a twinkle: "He's a good old cuss, but if I didn't blow my top once in a while and yell at him he'd never get anything done." He added, "You might as well come with us and watch."

"All right," said Pete, though he was a little mad himself at being pulled out of the shade and having the story broken off that way. Now Tobur would be too grouchy to finish it for the rest of the day.

They went into the shadowy cavern of the shed after the truck.

Machinery filled it, the semirobot machinery that made it possible for three beings to run this enormous place alone. But most of the things still needed intelligent beings at the controls; Uncle Gunnar couldn't afford too many automatics yet.

The truck had a small plastic cab and a long flat back. Tobur had the sides off by now, and he and Uncle Gunnar grunted as they lifted the fencing machine up and bolted it in place. They racked as many of the metal posts as they thought they'd need on it, added three big rolls of wire, and got into the cab. Pete said he'd rather ride in back.

So they bounced off over the fields, around trees and low hillocks, till the house was out of sight and they reached the bottom land. This was a forty-hectare patch of low-lying meadow on the edge of the great forest, covered with high lush grass that rippled in a faint wind. Uncle Gunnar wanted to make a pasture of it.

"I'll drive for a while and you guide the machine, Tobur," he said. "Pete, keep in sight of us."

It was fun to watch at first. The truck went slowly along the boundary, while the machine rammed down a long spike to make a hole, drove in the post, tamped down the earth around it, and strung three taut lines of wire, all in one dazzle of metal arms. Tobur had to walk alongside the truck, guiding the rammer and the post-setter. Pete brought up the rear.

But it got tiresome after a while, the same thing over and over again, and the day was warm and quiet, not meant for working. Pete yawned and lagged.

"I'll spell you there," said Uncle Gunnar presently.

"No need. Not tired," said Tobur, still sulky. Uncle Gunnar shrugged and drove on.

Pete sat down on a hummock and looked around him. From here you couldn't see the house. There was just the meadowland, sloping upward toward the cultivated fields on one side. On the other side was the forest. It was very still and lonely.

He lay down, feeling the soft turf give under his weight like a mattress. He crossed his hands under his head and looked upward. Tall white clouds walked through a sky of far clear blue, the sun wheeled on its slow horizonward way, the grass whispered and rustled around him, there was a drowsy murmur and buzz in the air. For a

while he picked shapes out of the clouds, a spaceship, a horse, a robot, Uncle Gunnar with his nose getting longer— He giggled and looked around him.

Only the grass waving above his head, its smell rich and green and not quite like the smell of grass on Earth. There was a little patch of wild flowers too, blue as if they were fallen pieces of sky, sweet and nose-tickling in their scent. An insect flew past his face with its wings a million colored shards of broken sunlight. Somewhere a bird was singing.

Pete wriggled deeper down into the grass and the earth and the summer warmth.

All of a sudden he heard the bells again, very near, high and thin and sweet. He sat up and looked wildly around.

The truck was far down the line, almost out of sight behind a jutting neck of trees. Otherwise he couldn't see anything—no, wait—

Pete sat very still, hardly breathing, and in a moment the tinkler came into view. It was no bigger than a rabbit, fat and pale-green and fuzzy, with little black eyes that twinkled merrily. It skipped around him, twitching its nose and going *ding-ding-ding* and then breaking into a rain of crystal chiming.

Pete thought back to what he'd asked Uncle Gunnar about the tinklers, the first morning after he'd seen one. What were they, where did they come from, why did they make that noise and how?

"Nobody knows, or cares very much either, Pete," Uncle Gunnar had said. "There are a lot of them, running around all over this part of the continent. I shot and dissected one once, to find how its vocal organs work—a matter of tympani and vibrating strings—but it wasn't very good eating and its hide was too thin to be useful either. So now I just let them alone."

"You shouldn't 'a killed it, Uncle Gunnar," said Pete, shocked. "That's like shooting a—an elf."

"Sure, an elf," put in Tobur. "And there a big old troll in the woods too, and fairy castles. I know."

"You know too damn many things, Tobur," said Uncle Gunnar. "No, this is just another little animal."

"But what do the tinklers do?" Pete asked.

"I don't know," said Uncle Gunnar. "They have the teeth and

digestive system of meat-eaters, but they're too small and weak to kill anything for themselves, and in fact I should think a fat juicy tinkler would be in some danger from carnivores itself. Especially with that silly music it makes—you can hear it half a kilometer away. Offhand, I should think they eat carrion, and reproduce like fury to keep up their numbers and keep their natural enemies fed."

That was all, except that Pete had seen them often, and heard them still more often, and never had a close look at one—till now.

He sat still, not daring to move, and pretty soon the tinkler quieted down and crouched less than a meter from him, wiggled its impudent nose and twinkled with its eyes.

"Hello," whispered Pete. "Hello, there."

The tinkler skipped to its feet and let go a happy carillon.

"Come here," said Pete. "Come here, fella. I won't hurt you."

The tinkler danced closer. Almost, Pete's outstretched hand touched it, the whiskers brushed his fingers, and then it was away and laughing at him.

Pete had to laugh too. He got up, very softly and slowly so as not to scare it. The tinkler waited for him and then skipped another meter away.

He walked slowly toward it. The tinkler wriggled with delight and jumped over the wild hedge at the boundary of the woods.

Without thinking, Pete followed it in under the trees. It danced close to him, brushed its soft nose against his leg, and then before he could grab it was off again, deeper into the forest.

Pete hesitated, looking around him. He wasn't supposed to go in here—

The trees stood tall around him, their trunks reaching up and up to a whispering vaulted roof of green and gold. It was cool and shadowy under them, speckled with sunlight and small bright flowers. A bird was trilling its gladness, and only the faint rustle of leaves answered it through the quiet—that, and the happy peal of elfin bells as the tinkler came back to Pete.

It circled around him, chiming and dancing, a little figure of laughter. It wanted him to follow it—yes, there it went, off again, stopping to look back over its shoulder at him.

Well, gollikers, it wouldn't hurt to go just a ways onward. Maybe

it wanted to show him something. And it was nice here in the woods.

The bells chimed eagerly as Pete started off. The tinkler came back, nudged him, bounded in a gleeful circle around his feet, and shot away into the farther shadows.

He trudged on for a while under the trees. It was like an enchanted forest, cool and dim and green, little spots and shafts of sunlight streaming down to pick out mossy rocks and colored fungi, and flowers hiding under fallen logs. Once in a while a strange thing would streak off from his path, and there was a sudden rush of birdsong as he approached a gnarled old tree. Cosmos, what could go wrong in here, what were the grownups afraid of?

The tinkler bounded eagerly ahead, shaking sound out of its throat like a snowstorm turned to music, stopping now and then to look after him and wait for him with a shivering impatience. *Come on, Pete, come on, come on!*

But where was it going, anyway, what was it leading him to?

The notion came suddenly to Pete, so suddenly that he stopped in his tracks with the awe and amazement of it. Why, sure—sure—that could be it—what else could it be?

Nerthus *wasn't* uninhabited, and man wasn't alone on it. There was a native race, a race of little furry elves who spoke in silver chimes, only the humans who roared out of the sky in their great steel ships frightened them. They hid away, deep in the shadowy quiet of their forests, they waited and watched—

Intelligent life!

And *he* had discovered it!

He hurried after his guide now, running, scrambling over logs and dodging past thickets. The tinkler darted ahead, a white streak in the shades; you'd never have thought the fat little fellow could move that quick. But when it saw he couldn't keep up, it stopped and waited.

Pete had to slow down after a while. He was panting and his heartbeat was loud in his ears. But he still shivered with the excitement of his tremendous discovery.

Sure, the tinklers were intelligent. Why else would this one be so plainly guiding him on? Intelligent, with a dancing, joyous, fairy mind that sang like its voice, a mind of moonlight and magic remote

from the slow ponderous brain of man. They had been frightened, they had hidden away, but had spied out the newcomers simply by pretending to be animals. And now they had decided the time was ripe to reveal themselves.

Only they wouldn't approach just anybody. It had to be someone they could trust, someone who would understand. A human who could tell them about his race with an insider's viewpoint, and who could still feel the way they did, keep their secrets, act as a go-between—a kid. Sure!

Wilson Pete, first ambassador of man to the tinklers of Nerthus!

He went on, deeper and deeper into the woods, and the tinkler rang and pealed and leaped before him. And what was it saying in its own strange language?

Welcome, Pete, welcome to Nerthus and the Old Dwellers, welcome to the realms of Faerie.

Another tinkler popped out of the dripping underbrush. The two of them gamboled together, darted back toward Pete, and ran on, tinkling furiously. Two of them—! Why, that must mean he was approaching their village.

It couldn't be far now. They'd lead him into the ring of little thatch houses; the whole population would swarm out in joy, torches and fireflies would bob and flare in the dark. They'd dance around him, singing their songs of welcome to the stranger from the stars, they'd bring him food in a golden dish and put him to bed on sweet-smelling moss. And when he came back next day with his tremendous news, the folks would forget they were mad at him.

The ground squished under his feet. Shadows were rising out of the earth, shadows and a thin steaming mist. He stumbled over logs and splashed into pools. Two more tinklers came out of the deeper darkness and frolicked around him.

They sure picked a nasty swamp to live in. Only maybe they had to do that, for protection from their enemies. Pete groped his way on, too weary to think straight any more. He only wanted sleep.

The sun was down now, darkness was whelming the world, but a last sullen ember glowed red between the trees. As he came out on the bank of the lake, it gleamed like a pool of blood.

He couldn't see far over it. The water was thick and scummy,

and trees and hummocks grew out of it. He plodded squashily along the muck of the bank, feeling a little ill from the dank smell of swamp and rot. The fog was thickening, swirling its tendrils around him. Here and there, phosphorescent fungi glowed blue in the murky twilight. The tinklers led the way, dancing and skipping over the dreary mudbanks—there was a whole crowd of them, pushing and jostling, swarming about him. Their belling filled the heavy air with a harsher note than he had heard before.

Something stirred, out there in the crimson water. Pete couldn't see very well what it was. But after a moment he made out a vague bulk by the shore, something looming and dark and misshapen. A dead stump? A small hummock? A—

The tinklers darted all around, shoving, crowding, pushing him now, and their eager noise drowned his thoughts. Only—they were urging him toward that thing—

Suddenly, Pete didn't want to go any farther. He stopped, and his heart was like a lump in him. "No," he gulped. "No."

The tinklers swarmed around, thrusting him on by their weight, and the last red light glistened on their eyes and their little sharp fangs.

Something closed around Pete's ankle, cold and hard and rubbery. He screamed. The tinklers danced with glee, *ting-ting-ting-a-ting-ting!*

The monster's tentacle dragged Pete through the mud, up toward the beak that snapped and grinned in its black lump of a body. He screamed and screamed. Help, help, help, Uncle Gunnar, Mother, help, help, *wake me up*—

It slid from the bank and pulled him under water. He drew a breath to howl and the rotten water rushed in, filled his lungs, his head roared and swam and whirled down into darkness, down and down and down.

Something else, a hand closing around his arm, a wild moment of struggle—Pete kicked out, lashing in a crazy howling darkness of thunder and horror, and then he was gulping air into his lungs, coughing and choking with fire in his chest.

He came to himself on the bank, and Uncle Gunnar's shape, huge

and dark in the gloom, was holding him. He screamed and shuddered himself against the man's breast.

"There, Pete." The deep voice sobbed, vibrating through his shivering body. "All right, fella, it's all right now—"

Something of his training in self-integration came back, psychophysiological habits, a shaking sort of calm. He huddled in his uncle's arms and watched where the lake roiled and bubbled.

"Why did you do it?" groaned the man. "Why did you do it? We trailed you as soon as we saw you were gone, Tobur and I, we followed you and guessed our way and came here in time to see that thing dragging you under water—but *why?*"

"The—t-t-t-tinkler—"

"What?"

"The-the t-t-t-tinkler—it led me—I th-thought it w-w-was intel—" Pete began crying.

"So—" Uncle Gunnar's voice was soft and cold and terrible. "So that's it. That's how they live. When we arrived, a whole pack of the little fiends was crouched on the bank, watching—

"They lure animals out here, carnivores, curious ones, and then that thing in the water kills the prey and shares with them— Maybe that's where some of those other kids went, to that devil's symbiosis —Tobur!" The last word was wrenched out of him.

"T-tobur?" whispered Pete.

The lake seethed and churned with struggle. "He's down there, fighting it," said Uncle Gunnar. "He leaped after you, got you free —passed you over to me, and then the monster dragged him under— He's fighting for his life down there, and I can't go help him. If the thing got both of us, there'd be no one to take you home. I can't help him, oh Cosmos, I can't help him!"

They sat waiting for a long time as night closed in on the swamp. Once a little bell tinkled in the dark. Pete screamed and huddled against Uncle Gunnar.

The man swore softly, brokenly.

The lake quieted. In the last gleam of light, Pete thought he could see blood on its surface.

Nothing came out of it.

Uncle Gunnar stood up. "I'm going down," he said in a harsh, strange voice. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

He stepped into the lake and his head went under. Pete shivered on the bank and tried not to scream. Another little chime pealed, he clutched the muddy ground with his hands and held his jaws shut with all the strength that was in him.

Uncle Gunnar came up again and waded back to shore. He moved slowly and wearily, like an old man, and flopped down as if all the strength had gone from him.

"They're both dead," he whispered. "I felt them down there. Tobur knifed it to death, but it broke his neck in the last struggle. They're both dead." Suddenly he rolled over and buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, Tobur, Tobur, you old windbag, it's going to be an empty world without you!"

Pete sat very quiet, for he had never seen a man cry before.

by Walter C. Davies

FORGOTTEN TONGUE

A brief, apparently meaningless message — but once you'd read it, your mind wasn't your own!

"HANDS UP, scum," grated a voice. "You're going for a jump."

Pepper raised his hands and coughed drily. "Forget it," he said. "You can't get away with this." He felt a knee jolt the small of his back in answer.

"Walk," said the voice.

The street was narrow, and the buildings flanking it had no lights. This was the Industrial, one of the three great divisions of New York Sector. Plants were resting their machinery for two hours out of the twenty-four, Pepper realized. As he walked along, as slowly as he dared, the clopping of metal soles against the pavement sounding behind him, he cursed himself for an imbecile, coming alone and unarmed through this bleak part of town.

"How long," he asked tentatively, "have you been gunning for me?" He wanted to find out how many of them there were.

"Keep moving," said the voice. "You don't get news out of us, scum."

He kept moving. They were headed in the direction of the Industrial Airport. That meant, probably, that he'd be crated like a gross of drills and accidentally dropped from a mile or so in the air. There

would be protests; threats, recriminations. Then the customary jeering retort from the Optimus Press: "If a Lower wishes to disguise himself for purposes of his own and is damaged in the process we fail to see how this is any reflection on the present able administration. *Honi soit—*"

Not daring to give way to panic, knowing that it would mean an immediate and ugly death, Pepper walked on and tried to keep his knees from buckling.

"Look," he began again. "We can make a deal—"

"Shut up!" snarled someone. "And stay shut. I'd like to—"

"Let him talk, captain," said another voice. Pepper stiffened as he heard it, for the dialect was unmistakably the throaty whine affected by the Optimus as the "pure" speech.

"Never mind," Pepper said. The sound of that voice was his death-warrant, he knew. Loyalists had been known to take bribes and deliver, their masters never. "How do you like this part of town, Cedric?" he demanded. "How does it strike you?"

"Why Cedric?" the voice of the Optimus asked one of the Loyalists, ignoring Pepper.

"Supposed to be funny, Mr. Fersen," said the Loyalist. Then Pepper heard a blow and cry. "I'm sorry, Mr.—sir—please—"

"Let that be a lesson," said Pepper. "Never tell the name. But don't worry, Mr. Fersen—I never heard of you."

"I'm just in," said the voice of the Optimus with a note of strain and disgust. "I'm just in from Scandinavia."

"In that case," said Pepper, "you'd do well to get back there. Because here comes a gang of Lowers that mean you ill."

Approaching them were people he knew. There was Marty, who worked in a glass plant, Pedro who managed an autokafe; hard faces gleaming under the wide-spread street lights.

Bats and clubs appeared in their hands. "Hello!" yelled Marty. The distance was about twice the width of the street.

"Dash it!" whined the voice of the Optimus. "Dash the luck! You'll have to fire into the thick of them."

The next thing Pepper knew was that he was dashing for the knot of Lowers down the street, zig-zagging wildly as projectiles buzzed about his ears. Even then he did not forget the rules he had been

taught in Training School; he ran with a calculated, staggering gait that would—at least in theory—unsettle any marksman.

His friends met him halfway; he was taken into their midst, lost in the little group of a dozen or so.

"They won't attack," he gasped. "It's too near the shift. They'd be mobbed—torn to pieces."

"Easy," soothed Marty. "Take it easy. They're breaking—going back. Jupiter—if I only had a camera to get those faces! Who are they?"

Pepper grinned feebly. "I never got a look at one of them," he said. "There was an Optimus with them by the name of Fersen. Do you know him?"

"Yes," said Marty. "I know him. He's a scientist. He's so thoroughly damned brilliant that even the Lowers' technical journals reprint his articles. He's a psychologist—experimental."

"Let it go," said Pepper. He shook his head. "What happened? How come you came to meet me—armed?"

"Something new of mine," said Marty. "We were trying it out. you can call it a psychological eavesdropper. We call it a modified Geiger-Muller counter reset for cerebrum-surface potential composition. It's thoroughly impractical, but we were waiting for you and I turned it on you for a demonstration. Before it blew out the thing showed that something had upset you terribly.

"Pedro thought it must have been a babe walking down the street. That's the Latin mind. When you didn't come we put two and two together and found a slight case of Optimus."

"Yes," said Pepper absently. "It's usually that."

It usually was. The Fusionists were nominally in power throughout the whole hemisphere, but the hand of the Optimus tended to grow clumsier and clumsier, showing through the thin veil of the Continental Congress. The Fusionists had been elected generally on the most immense wave of enthusiasm ever to sweep a new party into office. Their appeal had been almost irresistible—to combine the best features of both classes and work for harmony.

The Old Malarky, it soon developed. The Fusion officials—"Fightin' Bob" Howard, Oscar Stoop, "Iron Man" Morris—had been bought and paid for. Things were growing bad, worse than they had

ever been before. The Lowers were arming. Every issue of their newspapers contained inflammatory statements, direct slurs against the government and the Optimus Party.

Money was being spent like water by the Optimus; whole factories had been turned "Loyalist" by promises of tripled wages and security. The Loyal Lowers League was growing slowly, very slowly. There was a basically prejudiced attitude among the factory workers against turncoats of that stamp. This, of course, only widened the gulf between authentic Lowers and those who had joined the League. Things were in a very bad way indeed. Everybody on the continent was waiting for the next election. There was much wild talk about revolution and gutters running with blood.

Pepper was examining the psychological eavesdropper that had saved him some unpleasantness a while ago, tinkering with it and attempting to set it right.

"Well?" grunted Marty.

"Can't be done," said Pepper. "Let's turn to more constructive lines of thought. What did you say Fersen did?"

"Psychology, like us. He experiments. Last thing he did was a study of engramatic impulses."

"Do tell. What are they?"

"It's really the old 'group unconscious' idea in false face. Engrams are memories of previous lives stamped into the chromosomes. They carry compulsive force sometimes. If you hear a low-pitched, growling musical note your tendency is to shudder and draw away. If you're drunk you'll try to run like hell, because that note, if rightly delivered, means feline carnivores in misty Tertiary jungle."

"I see," mumbled Pepper. "When did Fersen publish this, and from where?"

"Oslo, eight years ago," said Marty.

"And what I've done then and up to now would sorely tax your limited understanding," said a full-throated whine.

Pepper slowly swiveled his chair around. The face that he saw was thin and keen, the hair an ashy blonde. But more to the point than hair and face was the blued steel tube that was in the speaker's hands.

"If I read your gaze aright," said the aristocrat, "you're wondering about this thing. Wonder no more, for it is a new development on the old-style chiller. It will congeal the blood of a turtle. What's more it is absolutely noiseless. I could kill you two where you sit and walk out and away to my very comfortable flat in Residential. My name is Fersen and I got here by bribing your janitor. Does that answer all your questions?"

"Doesn't even begin to," grunted Pepper sourly. "What now?"

"Now you are coming with me." He herded them from the room at the point of his weapon. As they came out into the open he hid it under his cloak.

"Stroll casually," said Fersen. "Be gay and lightsome. You're going to Residential to watch the beautiful women walk down the beautiful streets. Sorry I bungled that attempt last night, Pepper. It must have been irritating to both of us. You weren't going to be killed at all."

Nervously, Fersen went on talking. "You'll be interested to know that I was summoned to this continent by a grand conclave of Optimus. They propose to settle the unhappy question of the coming election once and for all time."

"By committing mass suicide?" suggested Marty.

Fersen was pleased to laugh briefly, like the snapping of a lock in a death-cell's door. "By no means," he chuckled. "By that gentlest of all arts, psychology. Whereat, enter Fersen. Get in, please." He gestured at the open door of a car that had pulled up beside them, silent and grim.

"C'est bon, children," smiled Fersen. "Romp if you wish." The two Lowers were staring in awe at the incredible battery of instruments racked on the walls, piled on the floors, hanging from the ceiling—everywhere.

"For a lab, not bad," finally admitted Pepper. "*All* psychological?" He stared hard at some electronic equipment—ikonoscopes, tubes and coils—that was sparking quietly away in a corner.

"All," said Fersen proudly. "Now be seated, please."

The two were shoved into chairs by bruisers, then buckled in securely with plastic straps. The bruisers saluted Fersen and left.

"Now," said the psychologist, carefully locking the door, "you poor scum think you know things about the human brain?" He paced to their chairs and stared contemptuously into their faces.

"You think," he spat, "that the incredible, contorted caverns of the mind can be unraveled by base-born apes of your caliber? Forget it. I'm going to show you things about behavior you won't believe even after you see them. I'm going to make you say that you love the Optimus Party and that you'll fight to the death anybody who doesn't.

"I'm going to leave you in such a state of cringing, gibbering bestiality that you're going to betray your friends and cut your children's throats and know that you're doing a noble thing."

"Hypnotism won't work that far," said Pepper matter-of-factly.

"I don't use hypnotism," grunted Fersen. "I'm turning to the classics. What good would an isolated case or so be? We've got to have a mass movement, a movement that will spread like wildfire. Look at that!" He held up a book.

"Odes of Anacreon," read Pepper from the title-page. "So what?"

Fersen grinned slowly. "I know," he said irrelevantly, "an arrangement of lines that would make you beat your brains out in despair. I know a sound that will make you so angry that you'll tear your own flesh if there's nobody else around. I know a certain juxtaposition of colored masses that would turn you into a satyr—drive you mad with insatiable lust."

"I see," said Marty slowly. "I see that you weren't quite finished with the engram in Oslo."

"I had barely begun. I am now able—once I've sized up the psyche of the subject—to deliver complex commands in a compulsion-language that cannot possibly be disobeyed."

"Go on," snapped Pepper, catching Fersen's eye. He had seen something at the edge of his vision that made his heart pound. He relaxed deliberately. "Go on!"

"This book," said Fersen, smiling again, "will be released to the general public very shortly—as soon as I've completed copy for a definitive edition. Picture this scene:

"A bookseller receives a shipment of the *Odes*. 'How now!' says bookseller. He is amazed. He is distressed. He did not order the *Odes*. He does not want to pay for them; they look like a slow-

moving item. He picks up a copy from the crate so as to get a better idea of what they are. 'What's this?' demands bookseller excitedly. For it seems to be a foreign tongue which he does not understand. Printed plainly on every page in large type is a brief message. Always the same, always legible.

"Bookseller than scans one page, very briefly. Some strange compulsion holds him; he reads further and the mysterious language is as plain as day. The message says: 'You are loyal to the Optimus Party. You will always be loyal to the Optimus Party. You will show the *Odes* to everybody you see. *Everybody must read the Odes. You will always be loyal to the Optimus Party.*'

" 'How now!' says bookseller again. 'Uncanny!' And he sees a woman on the street. He seizes her. She screams. He twists her arm and shoves her into his shop. She sits quietly while the *Odes* are shoved under her nose. She reads, lest this madman damage her. They then join forces and distribute copies of the book far and wide. It's like a prairie fire—people read and make others read.

"Pepper, there are twelve thousand booksellers in New York Sector. As soon as I've probed somewhat into your minds to determine whether a vowel or a diphthong would serve better to break down the resistance of a determined spirit opposed to the Optimus, I shall give orders to the printers, who've been immunized by a temporary hypnosis.

"Pepper, two hours after I have sent in copy the crates of books will arrive simultaneously in every one of the twelve thousand shops. Now relax. You're going to be investigated."

He turned to select instruments from a cluttered board. With a faint intake of breath Marty slid from the chair in which he had been strapped, from which he had been working himself free with desperate speed while Pepper held the psychologist's gaze.

Marty launched himself at Fersen's back, snapping an arm about his throat. The psychologist snatched a scalpel from the board before the two reeled away into the center of the cluttered room. With his other hand Marty grabbed frantically at the wrist that held the blade, closed with crushing force about it. The knife dropped, tinkling, to the floor. The two of them fell; Marty, shoving a knee into the small of Fersen's back, wrenched at his arm.

The psychologist collapsed shuddering in a heap. Marty warily broke away from him and picked up a casting, then clubbed Fersten carefully on the side of the head.

As he unbuckled Pepper he snapped: "Thank God that door's locked. Thank God he didn't make enough noise to get the guard. Thank God for so damned many things, Pepper. This is the chance of a lifetime!"

"I don't understand," said Pepper.

"You will," smiled Marty airily. "You probably will. Now where in the bloody dithering hell does he keep his notes—?"

Jay Morningside, bookseller, wearily said: "I'm sorry, ma'am; I'm in trade. I can't afford to have any political opinions."

"Please," said the girl appealingly. "This election petition will help turn out the Fusionist gang and put in Lowers who know how people like us feel and think—"

"I'm sorry," said Morningside. He turned her out of his shop and closed the door. The nerve of that babe! Coming right into his shop in the middle of a high-class Optimus neighborhood! Ruin his trade, he thought darkly. He could sue.

"Books!" yelled a hoarse voice at his delivery entrance. "Optimus Press delivery!"

"Thanks," he said, taking the crate. He broke off the plastic top and stared in amazement. "Two gross," he whispered. "And who the hell wants to buy the *Odes of Anacreon?*" He opened a copy and squinted at the weird words on the pages.

"How now!" said Morningside. He started at the words, and suddenly their meaning became plain as day.

"YOU WILL BE LOYAL TO THE LOWERS," it said. He smacked a fist on his plump knee. "So I shall!"

"YOU WILL TURN THE FUSIONIST PAWNS OUT OF OFFICE." Bravo!

"YOU WILL SAFEGUARD YOUR LIBERTIES AGAINST THE CONSPIRACIES OF THE OPTIMUS PARTY AND THEIR TOOLS." About time somebody spoke out like this!

"YOU WILL SHOW THE *ODES* TO EVERYBODY YOU SEE." No time like the present, he decided. Passing his shopwindow was a stately, plump dowager, aglitter with diamonds.

"Hey, babe!" he yelled.

She turned aghast as he came through the door. "Got something to show you," he explained, taking her by the arm.

"Unhand me!" she shrilled. "You scum! You vermin!"

"Don't get tough, lady," he pleaded. Finally he had to carry her over his shoulder into the shop and shove the book under her nose. She read and looked again.

"Great stuff," she said. "What everybody ought to know. It's about time those bloodsuckers got fired. Come on!" She took up an armful of the *Odes*.

"Come on!" she called gaily to Mr. Morningside. "We'll tell the world!"

They went together rollicking down the street, stopping passersby, handing out copies of the *Odes*.

They were telling the world, and the world was listening.

by
Richard
Matheson

CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

Which is really the stronger — yourself, or the carefully-composed image you present to the world?

I WENT out on the terrace to get away from the gabbing cocktailers.

I sat down in a dark corner, stretched out my legs and sighed in complete boredom.

The terrace door opened again and a man reeled out of the noisome gaiety. He staggered to the railing and looked out over the city.

"Oh, my God," he said, running a palsied hand through his thin hair. He shook his head wearily and gazed at the light on top of the Empire State Building.

Then he turned with a groan and stumbled toward me. He tripped on my shoes and almost fell on his face.

"Uh-oh," he muttered, flopping into another chair. "You must excuse me, sir."

"Nothing," I said.

"May I beg your indulgence, sir?" he inquired.

I started to speak but he set out begging it immediately.

"Listen," he said, waving a fat finger. "Listen, I'm telling you a story that's impossible."

He bent forward in the dark and stared at me as best he could through martini-clouded eyes. Then he fell back on the chair breathing steam whistles. He belched once.

"Listen now," he said. "Make no mistake. There are stranger things in heaven and earth and so on. You think I'm drunk. You're absolutely right. But why? You could never tell.

"My brother," he said, despairingly, "is no longer a man."

"End of story," I suggested.

"It all began a couple of months ago. He's publicity head for the Jenkins ad agency. Topnotch man.

"That is," he sobbed, "I mean to say . . . he *was.*"

He mused quietly, "Topnotch man."

Out of his breast pocket he dragged a handkerchief and blew a trumpet call which made me writhe.

"They used to come to him," he recalled, "all of them. There he'd sit in his office with his hat on his head, his shiny shoes on the desk. Charlie! they'd scream, give us an idea. He'd turn his hat once around (called it his thinking cap) and say, Boys! Cut it *this* way. And out of his lips would pour the damnedest ideas you ever heard. What a man!"

At this point he goggled at the moon and blew his nose again.

"So?"

"What a man," he repeated. "Best in the business. Give him his hat—that was a gag, of course. We thought."

I sighed and closed my eyes.

"He was a funny guy," said my narrator. "A funny guy."

"Ha," I said.

"He was a fashion plate. That's what he was. Suits had to be just right. Hats just right. Shoes, socks, everything custom made.

"Why, I remember once Charlie and his wife Miranda, the missus

and me—we all drove out to the country. It was hot. I took off my suit coat.

"But would he? No sir! Man isn't a man without his coat, says he.

"We went to this nice place with a stream and a grassy plot for sitting. It was awful hot. Miranda and my wife took off their shoes and waded in the water. I even joined them. But him! Ha!"

"Ha!"

"Not him," he said. "There I was, no shoes and socks, pants and shirt sleeves rolled up, wading like a kid. And up there, watching amused, was Charlie, still dressed to kill. We called him. Come on Charlie, off with the shoes!

"Oh, no. A man isn't a man without his shoes, he said. I couldn't even walk without them. This burned Miranda up. Half the time, she says, I don't know whether I'm married to a man or a wardrobe.

"That's the way he was," he sighed, "that's the way."

"End of story," I said.

"No," he said, his voice tingling; with horror I suppose.

"Now comes the terrible part," he said. "You know what I said about his clothes. Terrible fussy. Even his underwear had to be fitted."

"Mmm," I said.

"One day," he went on, his voice sinking to an awed murmur, "someone at the office took his hat for a gag.

"Charlie seemed to pretend he couldn't think. Hardly said a word. Just fumbled. Kept saying, hat, hat and staring out the window. I took him home.

"Miranda and I put him on the bed and while I was talking to her in the living room, we heard an awful thump. We ran in the bedroom.

"Charlie was crumpled up on the floor. We helped him up. His legs buckled under. What's wrong we asked him. Shoes, shoes, he said. We sat him on the bed. He picked up his shoes. They fell out of his hands.

"Gloves, gloves, he said. We stared at him. Gloves! he shrieked. Miranda was scared. She got him a pair and dropped them on his lap. He drew them on slowly and painfully. Then he bent over and put his shoes on.

"He got up and walked around the room as if he were testing his feet.

"Hat, he said and went to the closet. He stuck a hat on his head. And then—would you believe it?—he said, What the hell's the idea of taking me home? I've got work to do and I've got to fire the bastard who stole my hat. Back to the office he goes.

"You believe that?" he asked.

"Why not?" I answered, wearily.

"Well," he said, "I guess you can figure the rest. Miranda tells me that day before I left: Is *that* why the bum is so quiet in bed? I have to stick a hat on him every night?

"I was embarrassed."

He paused and sighed.

"Things got bad after that," he went on. "Without a hat Charlie couldn't think. Without shoes he couldn't walk. Without gloves he couldn't move his fingers. Even in summer he wore gloves. Doctors gave up. A psychiatrist went on a vacation after Charlie visited him."

"Finish it up," I said. "I have to leave soon."

"There isn't much more," he said. "Things got worse and worse. Charlie had to hire a man to dress him. Miranda got sick of him and moved into the guest room. My brother was losing everything.

"Then came *that* morning . . ."

He shuddered.

"I went to see how he was. The door to his apartment was wide open. I went in fast. The place was like a tomb.

"I called for Charlie's valet. Not a sound. I went in the bedroom.

"There was Charlie lying on his bed still as a corpse, mumbling to himself. Without a word, I got a hat and stuck it on his head. Where's your man? I asked. Where's Miranda?

"He stared at me with trembling lips. Charlie, what is it? I asked.

"My suit, he said.

"What suit? I asked him. What are you talking about?

"My suit, he whimpered, *it went to work this morning.*

"I figured he was out of his mind.

"My grey pin-stripe, he said hysterically. The one I wore yesterday. My valet screamed and I woke up. He was looking at the closet. I looked. My God!

"Right in front of the mirror, my underwear was assembling itself. One of my white shirts fluttered over the undershirt, the pants pulled up into a figure, a coat was thrown over the shirt, a tie was knotted. Socks and shoes went under the trousers. The coat arm reached up, took a hat off the closet shelf and stuck it in the air where the head would be if it had a head. Then the hat doffed itself once.

"Cut it *this* way, Charlie, a voice said and laughed like hell. The suit walked off. My valet ran off. Miranda's out.

"Charlie finished his story and I took his hat off so he could faint. I phoned for an ambulance."

The man shifted in his chair.

"That was last week," he said. "I've still got the shakes."

"That it?" I asked.

"About it," he said. "They tell me Charlie is getting weaker. Still in the hospital. Sits there on his bed with his grey hat sagging over his ears mumbling to himself. Can't talk, even with his hat on."

He mopped some perspiration off his face.

"That's not the worst part," he said, sobbing. "They tell me that Miranda is . . ."

He gulped.

"Is going steady with the suit. Telling all her friends the damn thing has more sex appeal than Charlie ever had."

"No," I said.

"Yes," he said. "She's in there now. Came in a little while ago."

He sank back in silent meditation.

I got up and stretched. We exchanged a glance and he fainted dead away.

I paid no attention. I went in and got Miranda and we left.

Our Diminishing Knowledge

The myth that animals and children automatically choose the foods they need has been exploded in experiments at the University of Pittsburgh. Only a few animals had the faculty, others failed to select such vital elements as proteins and magnesium salts. Several died of malnutrition while surrounded by plenty.

by C. M. Kornbluth

THE ROCKET OF 1955

THE SCHEME was all Fein's, but the trimmings that made it more than a pipe-dream, and its actual operation depended on me. How long the plan had been in incubation I do not know, but Fein, one day in the spring of 1954, broke it to me in a rather crude form. I pointed out some errors, corrected and amplified on the thing in general, and told him that I'd have no part of it—and changed my mind when he threatened to reveal certain indiscretions committed by me some years ago.

It was necessary that I spend some months in Europe, conducting research work incidental to the scheme. I returned with recorded statements, old newspapers, and photostatic copies of certain documents. There was a brief, quiet interview with that old, bushy-haired Viennese worshiped incontinently by the mob; he was convinced by the evidence I had compiled that it would be wise to assist us.

You all know what happened next—it was the professor's historic radio broadcast. Fein had drafted the thing, I had rewritten it, and told the astronomer to assume a German accent while reading. Some of the phrases were beautiful: "American dominion over the very planets!—veil at last ripped aside—man defies gravity—

travel through limitless space—plant the glorious red-white-and-blue banner in the soil of Mars!"

The requested contributions poured in. Newspapers and magazines ostentatiously donated yard-long checks of a few thousand dollars; the government gave a welcome half-million; heavy sugar came from the "Rocket Contribution Week" held in the nation's public schools; but independent contributions were the largest. We cleared seven million dollars, and then started to build the spaceship.

The virginium that took up most of the money was tin-plate; the monoatomic fluorine that gave us our terrific speed was hydrogen. The take-off was a party for the newsreels: the big, gleaming bullet extravagant with vanes and projections; speeches by the professor; Farley, who was to fly it to Mars, grinning into the cameras. He climbed an outside ladder to the nose of the thing, then dropped into the steering compartment. I screwed down the sound-proof door, smiling as he hammered to be let out. Rather to his surprise, there was no duplicate of the elaborate dummy controls he had been practicing on for the past few weeks.

I cautioned the pressmen to stand back under the shelter, and gave the professor the knife-switch that would send the rocket on its way. He hesitated too long—Fein hissed into his ear: "Anna Pareloff of Cracow, Herr Professor . . ."

The triple blade clicked into the sockets. The vaned projectile roared a hundred yards into the air with a wabbling curve—then exploded.

A photographer, eager for an angle-shot, was killed; so were some boys of the neighborhood. The steel roof protected the rest of us. Fein and I shook hands, while the pressmen screamed into the telephones which we had provided.

But the professor got drunk, and, disgusted with the part he had played in the affair, told all and poisoned himself. Fein and I left the cash behind and hopped a freight. We were picked off it by a vigilance committee (headed by a man who had lost fifty cents in our rocket). Fein was too frightened to talk or write so they hanged him first, and gave me a paper and pencil to tell the story as best I could.

Here they come, with an insulting thick rope.

THE DISSECTING TABLE

Criticism of recent science-fantasy books

SEVEN SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS OF H. G. WELLS; Dover Publications, $3.95.

It would be hard to think of any project which could be of greater service to science-fantasy readers than the reissuing of these seven novels in omnibus form. Here are *The First Men in the Moon, The Island of Dr. Moreau, The War of the Worlds, The Invisible Man, The Time Machine, The Food of the Gods,* and *In the Days of the Comet* — all beautifully realized treatments of themes which have become basic in science-fantasy — and all, except the first, the original conceptions of that tremendous, teeming, prophetic brain that was H. G. Wells.

Herbert F. West, reviewing Antonina Vallentin's recent biography of Wells in the *New York Times,* remarked, "As time has gone on and our problems have changed it becomes exceedingly difficult to take Wells seriously as an artist who finds expression in the novel. It has been rightly said, I think, that he sold his birthright for a mess of propaganda. . . . Nor is his style conducive to lasting fame. He was unwilling, or could not, take the time necessary to develop a literary style. He said once, 'I write, like I walk, because I want to get somewhere.' . . . He never became a writer of genuine distinction."

From this judgment I most heartily dissent. Wells' claim to immortality is rejected on two counts: that the people in his novels are mere vehicles for his ideas and his imaginative conceptions of the future; and that his style is always subservient to what he has to say. Both statements are unarguably true; but neither is damning unless we accept the notion that the novel of ideas cannot be art, or that style should never be secondary to content.

Wells' characters are no waxen puppets; they are living, breathing, entirely believable human beings; but it is perfectly true that they are little figures in the foreground, dwarfed by the overwhelming

hugeness of the events which loom behind them. So they should be; a human character drawn large enough to compete with those events would be utterly and ludicrously out of proportion.

Wells' style is fluent, lucid, and instantly recognizable as his own. Above all, it does not get in the way of his story; his reader is never halted in the midst of a cosmic cataclysm to appreciate the exquisite perfection of a participle.

A true prophet is an uncomfortable sort of thing for common minds; he is a freak, not quite respectable; he is an odd-shaped object, with sharp corners and angles, hard to classify; therefore best forget him. But I think posterity can safely be expected to see that prophecy in literature is no wild and unearned talent; that it is, on the contrary, a deliberate and supremely difficult act of literary creation.

THE HUMANOIDS, by Jack Williamson; Grosset & Dunlap, $1.00.

It is no pleasure to me to make the admission, but this novel, which in its brief career has so far seen four separate editions (the magazine version, Simon & Schuster's, the present one, and a French translation published by Editions Stock), is without doubt one of the most important science-fantasy books of the last five years.

The story deals with a basic, immediate, and very probably insoluble philosophical problem. A human scientist, embittered by mankind's ceaseless attempts to destroy itself, perfects and sets in operation the humanoids—a horde of efficient, respectful robot servants, all controlled by a single cybernetic brain, whose prime directive is, "To serve and obey, and guard men from harm." But the first two fractions of this commandment are slighted by the humanoids' built-in interpretive mechanism; it is the third with which they are concerned, and they execute it to the last humorless inch. Wherever their expanding power touches, they guard men from any conceivable harm, whether the men want to be guarded or not—even to the extent of depriving pathologically unhappy people of their identities.

The rest of the story is occupied by the frantic attempts of the inventor and others to halt this monster, and change its interpreta-

tion of the prime directive so that the robots will actually serve and not rule . . . up until the final episode, wherein the book's unhappy protagonist learns that among a small group of renegades who are coöperating with the humanoids is the inventor himself, now a convert to the robots' present methods. The story ends on a completely ambiguous note, the question unresolved—are the humanoids, in the last analysis, humanity's salvation or destruction? And very properly so; as I said above, the problem is probably insoluble.

The book is important, then, because its theme is important, and because Williamson's treatment is both honest and dramatically effective. It is also a most painstaking and conscientious job of writing, in everything from the plot-structure to the pseudo-scientific window-dressing.

It pains me to admit all this, simply because the writing itself is so thoroughly, unremittingly and excruciatingly bad.

Williamson has the misfortune to be an exceptionally careful craftsman who grew up in one of the crudest eras of pulp fiction. The usual technique in those days was to grab the reader by his nose at the earliest possible moment in a story and never let go: thus, the hero invariably started out in a tough situation, which got progressively worse until the last scene, when, plausibly or not, the problem was solved.

Williamson, as a struggling young author, earned an impressive success simply by applying this system more thoroughly than any of his rivals. Williamson began each story by putting his hero in approximately the position of a seventy-year-old paralytic in a plaster cast who is required to do battle with a saber-tooth tiger—and, there being no place to go from there, kept him in the same predicament throughout the story, only adding an extra fang from time to time.

The years have polished this technique but have not altered it; and the effect of it upon an even moderately sensitive ear is like that of an irritating sound repeated over and over and over and endlessly over. Dr. Clay Forester, this novel's central character, is the victim of every torment Williamson could devise for him: he is fatigued to the limit of his endurance, sick with fear, frustrated by his work and his personal relationships, injured in his ego by everyone around him, confronted by insoluble and vitally important problems—and

his knee hurts; and all this, very nearly without a letup, goes on throughout the story.

I read this book through to the end for professional reasons, and came to the conclusion given above. But if I had been reading purely for pleasure, I would have breathed a prayer for Dr. Forester to break his neck somewhere during the second chapter, and turned to Dr. Doolittle.

FARMER IN THE SKY, by Robert A. Heinlein; Scribner's, $2.50.

Like this writer's three previous science-fiction books for boys *(Rocket Ship Galileo, Space Cadet* and *The Red Planet), Farmer In the Sky* might easily serve as a primer for science-fiction writers. For in order to understand what is meant by the word "juvenile" as applied to this work, you must remember that *Alice In Wonderland* and *Treasure Island* were also written for children. The book is not in any sense written down. It is a typical Heinlein story—that is to say, typically brilliant, thorough, and readable. Here, for the first time, is a completely detailed projection of the life that may be led by your grandchildren and mine as colonists of the moons of Jupiter. Heinlein, like Wells, is a true prophet; when you have read this book, you will find it almost impossible to doubt that future events will take the exact course he describes. This is his peculiar strength, that the forces at work in his novels are not the forces of auctorial whim but those of history; they are not merely possible in theory but inevitable in fact.

Like Wells, Heinlein has a clean but undistinguished style; his choice of words is never so conspicuously good or bad as to interfere with the picture he is showing you. And like Wells' characters, Heinlein's are less important than the backdrop against which they move. But this comparison goes no further, for Wells was a romantic dabbler in science; Heinlein is an engineer by training and a humanist by temperament. Heinlein's people are objects in the plenum, to be accurately and soberly described, not to be commented upon. If there is emotion in the picture, it is the emotion of the protagonist, not Heinlein's. Most striking of all, these people are not preselected for their gigantic intelligence or their colorful personalities;

they are simply a random sample of genus homo. So far as I can recall, there is not a character in any one of Heinlein's stories who is not essentially ordinary. Some of them have eccentricities: some are long-lived, one has an eidetic memory, another has two heads; but in every other respect, they are triumphantly commonplace. And this again is a singular strength of Heinlein's, for only that rare, uncolored vision of the engineer, driven by a humanist's sympathy, could make the commonplace an adventure.

Buy this book. Use your son as an excuse if you have to, but buy it. It is guaranteed to keep you up until four if you make the mistake of beginning it at midnight, and it will stick in your memory for a long time to come.

THE WORLD OF $\overline{A}$, by A. E. van Vogt; Grosset & Dunlap, $1.00.

This widely-read novel began its career as a pretentious, foolish, wildly complicated and self-contradictory magazine serial. In the hard-cover version, a ruthless pruning and trimming job is evident: whole sections of irrelevant material have been lifted out in toto, motivations and relationships have been patched into some kind of coherent shape, and many of the objectionable features of van Vogt's magazine style—the inversions, repetitions, overemphasis and mangled grammar—have been smoothed out. All of these were encumbrances to the story's one virtue, its powerful, exciting movement.

What emerges, then, is a fairly straightforward adventure story in a pseudoscientific background. There is excitement in it, and if you do not examine the plot too carefully (a disadvantage of the present version is that this is now easier to do) you won't miss the vacant stages in its scaffolding.

FURY, by Henry Kuttner; Grosset & Dunlap, $1.00.

Here is another magazine serial, and one which has never before been published in hard covers. It is not Kuttner's best work, but it suffers only in comparison to his best; compared to *The World of $\overline{A}$*, it is a miracle of lucidity, sound construction and good writing.

The background is that of the undersea cities of Venus, some cen-

turies after the destruction of Earth in atomic war. No foothold has ever been established on the land surface of Venus, which is an incredibly voracious jungle; and now the undersea culture has reached a crisis-point. The Keep dwellers have become too stable, too self-satisfied; if they don't attack the surface now—thus transforming their dying civilization to a vigorous pioneer culture—they never will; they'll stay under their domes till their technology drops too low to maintain them, and then die.

The instrument of this struggle against decadence is a singular product of that decadence—a member of the ruling Immortals of the Keeps who was deformed at birth by his psychotic father (who hated him as the symbol and instrument of his wife's death) and denied knowledge of his abnormal life-span. Thus cramped into an environment too narrow for his intelligence, he becomes a completely amoral criminal—and labors, as it turns out, to save the race from destruction purely because it satisfies his own will to power. The background is colorful and convincing, the narrative both logical and exciting. Recommended.

CONAN THE CONQUEROR, by Robert E. Howard; Gnome Press, $2.75.

There is a Howard cult, less numerous, apparently, and certainly less vociferous than the Lovecraft cult—perhaps because Howard's fantasy is of a quiet and unassuming kind, and therefore doesn't make his followers quite so defensive.

The reader new to Howard's work, in fact, will find little out of the ordinary in the opening chapters of this story, set in a prehistoric civilization of Howard's imagination—or in the chief character, Conan himself, the much-vaunted fabulous barbarian. Conan is, to be frank, a big lump: not bright, of undistinguished character, and not even especially agile. (His defeats in personal combat throughout the story invariably take place when he trips over something.) But the story has an adventurous sweep; it never slows down for a moment; and in the end, the reader may find himself with a curious, apparently causeless affection for Conan and his world. Should this occur, there is more pleasure of the same kind in store for him; this book is the first of a series to be issued by Gnome Press.

by Harry Harrison

ROCK DIVER

If an undersea diver's equipment failed, he still had a slim chance to live. But between Pete and the surface was the crushing weight of a half-mile of stone. . . .

THE WIND hurtled over the crest of the ridge and rushed down the slope in an icy torrent. It tore at Pete's canvas suit, pelting him with steel-hard particles of ice. Head down, he fought against it as he worked his way uphill towards the granite outcropping.

He was freezing to death. A man can't wear enough clothes to stay alive in fifty degrees below zero. Pete could feel the numbness creeping up his arms. When he wiped his frozen breath from his whiskers there was no sensation. His skin was white and shiny wherever it was exposed to the Alaskan air.

"All in a day's work." His cracked lips painfully shaped themselves into the ghost of a smile. "If any of those claim-jumping scissorbills followed me this far they're gonna be awful cold before they get back."

The outcropping sheltered him as he fumbled for the switch at his side. A shrill whine built up in the steel box slung at his belt. The sudden hiss of released oxygen was cut off as he snapped shut the faceplate of his helmet. Pete clambered onto the granite ridge that pushed up through the frozen ground.

He stood straight against the wind now, not feeling its pressure, the phantom snowflakes swirling through his body. Following the outcropping, he slowly walked into the ground. The top of his helmet bobbed for a second like a bottle in water, then sank below the surface of the snow.

Underground it was warmer, the wind and cold left far behind; Pete stopped and shook the snow from his suit. He carefully unhooked the ultra-light from his pack and switched it on. The light beam, polarized to his own mass-penetrating frequency, reached out through the layers of surrounding earth as if they were cloudy gelatine.

Pete had been a rock diver for eleven years, but the sight of this incredible environment never ceased to amaze him. He took the miracle of his vibratory penetrator, the rock diver's "walk-through", for granted. It was just a gadget, a good gadget, but something he could take apart and fix if he had to. The important thing was what it did to the world around him.

The hogback of granite started at his feet and sank down into a murky sea of red fog. It was a fog composed of the lighter limestone and other rock, sweeping away in frozen layers. Seemingly suspended in mid-air were granite boulders and rocks of all sizes, caught in the strata of lighter materials. He ducked his head carefully to avoid these.

If his preliminary survey was right, this rocky ridge should lead him to the site of the missing lode. He had been following leads and drifts for over a year now, closing in on what he hoped was the source of the smaller veins.

He trudged downward, leaning forward as he pushed his way through the soupy limestone. It rushed through and around him like a strong current of water. It was getting harder every day to push through the stuff. The piezo crystal of his walk-through was getting further away from the optimum frequency every day. It took

a hard push to get the atoms of his body between those of the surrounding matter. He twisted his head around and blinked to focus his eyes on the two-inch oscilloscope screen set inside his helmet. The little green face smiled at him—the jagged wave-pattern gleaming like a row of broken teeth. His jaw clenched at the variations between the reading and the true pattern etched onto the surface of the tube. If the crystal failed, the entire circuit was inoperative, and frozen death waited quietly in the air far above him for the day he couldn't go under. Or he might be underground when the crystal collapsed. Death was here, too, a quicker and much more spectacular death that would leave him stuck forever like a fly in amber. A fly that is part of the amber. He thought about the way Soft-Head had got his and shuddered slightly.

Soft-Head Samuels had been one of the old gang, the hard-bitten rock divers who had been the first to uncover the mineral wealth under the eternal Alaskan snows. Soft-Head had slipped off a hogback two hundred meters down, and literally fallen face first into the fabulous White Owl mother lode. That was the strike that started the rush of '63. As the money-hungry hordes rushed north to Dawson he had strolled south with a fortune. He came back in three years with no more than his plane fare and a measureless distrust of humanity.

He rejoined the little group around the pot-bellied stove, content just to sit among his old cronies. He didn't talk about his trip to the outside and no one asked any questions. The only sign that he had been away was the way he clamped down on his cigar whenever a stranger came into the room. North American Mining grubstaked him to a new outfit and he went back to tramping the underground wastes.

One day he walked into the ground and never came up again. "Got stuck," they muttered, but they didn't know just where until Pete walked through him in '71.

Pete remembered it, too well. He had been dog-tired and sleepy when he had walked through that hunk of rock that hadn't been all rock. Soft-Head was standing there—trapped for eternity in the stone. His face was horror-stricken as he stood half bent over, grabbing at his switch box. For one horrible instant Soft-Head must

have known that something was wrong with his walk-through—then the rock had closed in. He had been been standing there for seven years in the same position he would occupy for all eternity, the atoms of his body mixed inextricably with the atoms of the surrounding rock.

Pete cursed under his breath. If he didn't get enough of a strike pretty soon to buy a new crystal, he would become part of that timeless gallery of lost prospectors. His power pack was shot and his oxygen tank leaked. His beat-up Miller sub-suit belonged in a museum, not on active duty. It was patched like an inner tube and still wouldn't hold air the way it should. All he needed was one strike, one *little* strike.

His helmet light picked a blue glint from some crystals in the gulley wall. It might be Ytt. He leaped off the granite spine he had been following and sank slowly through the lighter rock. Plugging his hand neutralizer into the socket in his belt, he lifted out a foot-thick section of rock. The shining rod of the neutralizer adjusted the vibration plane of the sample to the same frequency as his own. Pete pressed the mouth-shaped opening of the spectro-analyzer to the boulder and pressed the trigger. The brief, intensely hot atomic flame blazed against the hard surface, vaporizing it instantly.

The film transparency popped out of the analyzer and Pete studied the spectrographic lines intently. Wrong again; no trace of the familiar Yttrotantalite lines. With an angry motion he stowed the test equipment in his pack and ploughed on through the gummy rock.

Yttrotantalite was the ore and tantalum was the metal extracted from it. This rare metal was the main ingredient of the delicate piezoelectric crystals that made the vibratory mass penetrator possible. Ytt made tantalum, tantalum made crystals, crystals operated the walk-through that he used to find more Ytt to make. . . . It was just like a squirrel cage, and Pete was the squirrel, a very unhappy animal at the present moment.

Pete carefully turned the rheostat knob on the walk-through, feeding a trifle more power into the circuit. It would be hard on the crystal, but he needed it to enable him to push through the jelly-like earth.

His thoughts kept returning to that little crystal that meant his life.

It was a thin wafer of what looked like dirty glass, ground and polished to the most exacting tolerances. When subjected to an almost microscopic current, it vibrated at exactly the correct frequency that allowed one mass to slide between the molecules of another. This weak signal in turn controlled the much more powerful circuit that enabled himself and all his equipment to move through the earth. If the crystal failed, the atoms of his body would return to the vibratory plane of the normal world and alloy themselves with the earth atoms through which he was moving. . . . Pete shook his head as if to clear away the offending thoughts and quickened his pace down the slope.

He had been pushing against the resisting rock for three hours now and his leg-muscles felt like hot pokers. In a few minutes he would have to turn back, if he wanted to leave himself a margin of safety. But he had been getting Ytt traces for an hour now, and they seemed to be getting stronger as he followed the probable course of the drift. The mother lode had to be a rich one—if he could only find it!

It was time to start the long uphill return. Pete jerked a rock for a last test. He'd mark the spot and take up the search tomorrow. The test bulb flashed and he held the transparency against it.

His body tensed and his heart began to thud heavily. He blinked and looked again—it was there! The tantalum lines burned through the weaker traces with a harsh brilliance. His hand was shaking as he jerked open his knee pocket. He had a comparison film from the White Owl claim, the richest in the territory. There wasn't the slightest doubt—his was the richer ore!

He took the half-crystals out of their cushioned pouch and gently placed the B crystal in the hole he had made when he removed the sample rock. No one else could ever find this spot without the other half of the same crystal, ground accurately to a single ultra-shortwave frequency. If half A were used to key the frequency of a signal generator, side B would bounce back an echo of the same wavelength that would be picked up by a delicate receiver. In this way the crystal both marked the claim and enabled Pete to find his way back to it.

He carefully stowed the A crystal in its cushioned compartment

and started the long trek back to the surface. Walking was almost impossible; the old crystal in his walk-through was deviating so far that he could scarcely push through the gluey earth. He could feel the imponderable mass of the half-mile of rock over his head, waiting to imprison him in its eternal grip. The only way to the surface was to follow the long hogback of granite until it finally cleared the surface.

The crystal had been in continuous use now for over five hours. If he could only turn it off for a while, the whole unit would have a chance to cool down. His hand shook as he fumbled with his pack straps—he forced himself to slow down and do the job properly.

He turned the hand neutralizer to full power and held the glowing rod at arm's length before him. Out of the haze there suddenly materialized an eighteen-foot boulder of limestone, adjusted now to his own penetrating frequency. Gravity gripped the gigantic rock and it slowly sank. When it had cleared the level of the granite ledge, he turned off the neutralizer. There was a heavy crunch as the molecules of the boulder welded themselves firmly to those of the surrounding rock. Pete stepped into the artificial bubble he had formed in the rock and turned off his walk-through.

With a suddenness that never ceased to amaze him, his hazy surroundings became solid walls of rock. His helmet light splashed off the sides of the little chamber, a bubble with no exit, one-half mile below the freezing Alaskan wastes.

With a grunt of relief, Pete slipped out of his heavy pack and stretched his aching muscles. He had to conserve oxygen; that was the reason he had picked this particular spot. His artificial cave cut through a vein of RbO, rubidium oxide. It was a cheap and plentiful mineral, not worth mining this far north, but still the rock diver's best friend.

Pete rummaged in the pack for the airmaker and fastened its power pack to his belt. He thumbed the unit on and plunged the contact points into the RbO vein. The silent flash illuminating the chamber glinted on the white snow that was beginning to fall. The flakes of oxygen released by the airmaker melted before they touched the floor. The underground room was getting a lifegiving atmosphere

of its own. With air around him, he could open his faceplate and get some chow out of his pack.

He cautiously cracked the helmet valve and sniffed. The air was good, although pressure was low—around twelve pounds. The oxygen concentration was a little too high; he giggled happily with a mild oxygen jag. Pete hummed tunelessly as he tore the cardboard wrapper from a ration pack.

Cool water from the canteen washed down the tasteless hard tack, but he smiled, thinking of thick, juicy steaks. The claim would be assayed and mine owners' eyes would bulge when they read the report. Then they would come to *him*. Dignified, sincere men clutching contracts in their well-manicured hands. He would sell to the highest bidder, the entire claim; let someone else do all the work for a change. They would level and surface this granite ridge and big pressure trucks would plow through the earth, bringing miners to and from the underground diggings. He relaxed against the curved wall of the bubble, smiling. He could see himself, bathed, shaven and manicured, walking into the Miners' Rest. . . .

The day-dream vanished as two men in bulging subsuits stepped through the rock wall. Their figures were transparent; their feet sank into the ground with each step. Both men suddenly jumped into the air; at mid-arc they switched off their walk-throughs. The figures gained solidity and landed heavily on the floor. They opened their face-plates and sniffed the air.

The shorter man smiled. "It sure smells nice in here, right, Mo?"

Mo was having trouble getting his helmet off; his voice rumbled out through the folds of cloth. "Right, Algie." The helmet came free with a snap.

Pete's eyes widened at the sight, and Algie smiled a humorless grin. "Mo ain't much to look at, but you could learn to like him."

Mo was a giant, seven feet from his boots to the crown of his bullet-shaped head, shaved smooth and glistening with sweat. He must have been born ugly, and Time had not improved him. His nose was flattened, one ear was little more than a rag, and a thick mass of white scar-tissue drew up his upper lip. Two yellow teeth gleamed through the opening.

Pete slowly closed his canteen and stowed it in the pack. They

might be honest rock divers, but they didn't look it. "Anything I can do for you guys?" he asked.

"No thanks, pal," said the short one, "we was just going by and saw the flash of your airmaker. We thought maybe it was one of our pals, so we come over to see. Rock diving sure is a lousy racket these days, ain't it?" As he talked, the little man's eyes flicked casually around the room, taking in everything. With a wheeze, Mo sat down against the wall.

"You're right," said Pete carefully. "I haven't had a strike in months. You guys newcomers? I don't think I've seen you around the camp."

Algie did not reply. He was staring intently at Pete's bulging sample case.

He snapped open a huge clasp knife. "What you got in the sample case, Mac?"

"Just some low-grade ore I picked up. Going to have it assayed, but I doubt if it's even worth carrying. I'll show you."

Pete stood up and walked toward the case. As he passed in front of Algie, he bent swiftly, grabbed the knife hand and jabbed his knee viciously into the short man's stomach. Algie jackknifed and Pete chopped his neck sharply with the edge of his palm. He didn't wait to see him fall but dived towards the pack.

He pulled his Army .45 with one hand and scooped out the signal crystal with the other, raising his steel-shod boot to stamp the crystal to powder.

His heel never came down. A gigantic fist gripped his ankle, stopping Pete's whole bulk in midair. He tried to bring the gun around, but a hand as large as a ham clutched his wrist. He screamed as the bones grated together. The automatic dropped from his nerveless fingers.

He hung head down for five minutes while Mo pleaded with the unconscious Algie to tell him what to do. Algie regained consciousness and sat up cursing and rubbing his neck. He told Mo what to do and sat there smiling until Pete lost consciousness.

Slap-slap, slap-slap; his head rocked back and forth in time to the blows. He couldn't stop them, they jarred his head, shook his entire body. From very far away he heard Algie's voice.

"That's enough. Mo, that's *enough*. He's coming around now."

Pete braced himself painfully against the wall and wiped the blood out of his eyes. The short man's face swam into his vision.

"Mac, you're giving too much trouble. We're going to take your crystal and find your strike, and if it's as good as the samples you got there, I'm going to be very happy and celebrate by killing you real slow. If we don't find it, you get killed *slower*. You get yours either way. Nobody *ever* hits Algie, don't you know that?"

They turned on Pete's walk-through and half carried, half dragged him through the wall. About twenty feet away they emerged in another artificial bubble, much larger than his own. It was almost filled by the metallic bulk of an atomic tractor.

Mo pushed him to the floor and kicked his walk-through into a useless ruin. The giant stepped over Pete's body and lumbered across the room. As he swung himself aboard the tractor, Algie switched on the large walk-through unit. Pete saw Algie's mouth open with silent laughter as the ghostly machine lurched forward and drove into the wall.

Pete turned and pawed through the crushed remains of his walk-through. Completely useless. They had done a thorough job, and there was nothing else in this globular tomb that could help him out. His sub-rock radio was in his own bubble; with that he could call the Army base and have a patrol here in twenty minutes. But there was a little matter of twenty feet of rock between the radio and himself.

His light swung up and down the wall. That three-foot vein of RbO must be the same one that ran through his own chamber.

He grabbed his belt. The airmaker was still there! He pressed the points to the wall and watched the silver snow spring out. Pieces of rock fell loose as he worked in a circle. If the power pack held out—and if they didn't come back too soon—

With each flash of the airmaker an inch-thick slab of rock crumbled away. The accumulators took 3.7 seconds to recharge; then the white flash would leap out and blast loose another mass of rubble. He worked furiously with his left hand to clear away the shattered rock.

Blast with the right arm—push with the left—blast and push—

blast and push. He laughed and sobbed at the same time, warm tears running down his cheeks. He had forgotten the tremendous amounts of oxygen he was releasing. The walls reeled drunkenly around him.

Stopping just long enough to seal his helmet, Pete turned back to the wall of his makeshift tunnel. He blasted and struggled with the resisting rock, trying to ignore his throbbing head. He lay on his side, pushing the broken stones behind him, packing them solid with his feet.

He had left the large bubble behind and was sealed into his own tiny chamber far under the earth. He could feel the weight of a half-mile of solid rock pushing down on him, crushing the breath from his lungs. If the airmaker died now, he would lie there and rot in this hand-hewn tomb! Pete tried to push the thought from his mind —to concentrate only on blasting his way through the earth.

Time seemed to stand still as he struggled on through an eternity of effort. His arms worked like pistons while his bloody fingers scrabbled at the corroded rock.

He dropped his arms for a few precious moments while his burning lungs pumped air. The weakened rock before him crumbled and blew away with an explosive sound. The air whistled through the ragged opening. The pressure in the two chambers was equalizing—he had holed through!

He was blasting at the edges of the hole with the weakened airmaker when the legs walked up next to him. Algie's face pushed through the low rock ceiling, a ferocious scowl on its features. There was no room to materialize; all the impotent Algie could do was to shake his fist at—and through—Pete's face.

A monstrous crunching came from the loose rubble behind him; the rock fell away and Mo pushed through. Pete couldn't turn to fight, but he landed one shoe on the giant's shapeless nose before monster hands clutched his ankles.

He was dragged through the rocky tube like a child, hauled back to the bigger cavern. When Mo dropped him he just slid to the floor and lay there gasping. . . . He had been so close.

Algie bent over him. "You're too smart, Mac. I'm going to shoot you now, so you don't give me no more trouble."

He pulled Pete's .45 out of his pocket, grabbed it by the slide and charged it. "By the way, we found your strike. It's going to make me richer'n hell. Glad, Mac?"

Algie squeezed the trigger and a hammer-blow struck Pete's thigh. The little man stood over Pete, grinning.

"I'm going to give you all these slugs where they won't kill you —not right away. Ready for the next one, Mac?"

Pete pushed up onto one elbow and pressed his hand against the muzzle of the gun. Algie's grin widened. "Fine, stop the bullet with your hand!"

He squeezed the trigger; the gun clicked sharply. A ludicrous expression of amazement came over his face. Pete rose up and pressed the airmaker against Algie's face-plate. The expression was still there when his head exploded into frosty ribbons.

Pete dived on the gun, charged it out of the half-cocked position and swung around. Algie had been smart, but not smart enough to know that the muzzle of a regulation .45 acts as a safety. When you press against it the barrel is pushed back into half-cock position and can't be fired until the slide is worked to recharge it.

Mo came stumbling across the room, his jaw gaping in amazement. Swinging around on his good leg, Pete waved the gun at him. "Hold it right there, Mo. You're going to help me get back to town."

The giant didn't hear him; there was room in his mind for only one thought.

"You killed Algie—you killed Algie!"

Pete fired half the clip before the big man dropped.

He turned from the dying man with a shudder. It had been self-defense, but that thought didn't help the sick feeling in his stomach. He twisted his belt around his leg to stop the blood and applied a sterile bandage from the tractor's first-aid kit.

The tractor would get him back; he would let the Army take care of the mess here. He pushed into the driver's seat and kicked the engine into life. The cat's walk-through operated perfectly; the machine crawled steadily toward the surface. Pete rested his wounded leg on the cowling and let the earth flow smoothly past and through him.

It was still snowing when the tractor broke through to the surface.

by

Halliday Sutherland

VALLEY OF DOOM

The calculations of the Total State included everything — even a measured dose of beauty.

I

MR. SMITH, better known in State records as H/99 Hampstead—this being also the address of the house in which he lived—entered the breakfast-room at 4 A.M., punctual to a second.

With its white-painted walls, rounded cornices, tiled floor, and windows wide open to the fresh but cold morning breeze, the room was in perfect taste hygienically. It was furnished with a table and four chairs, fashioned out of angle-iron enameled white, and the only attempt at mural decorative art was a genuine photogravure of Karl Marx.

On the wall beside the door was a time-recorder, and as Smith

pressed the button bearing his number a bell rang and a red light, then a white light, appeared for a second. By these signs Smith knew that the time of his arrival was duly recorded at the Bureau of Industry. His comrade, on festive occasions called Mrs. Smith, and their two children—Henry, aged 21, and Jane, aged 17—were already standing round the table. Without more ado Smith took his place at the end of the table and in a loud, clear voice read the Act of Parliament for the day.

As it happened to be Chromosome, the 73rd day of the month Electron, the appropriate Act had reference to the necessity for, and value of, deep breathing exercises, in which the whole family afterwards engaged.

Refreshed by these gymnastics, they sat down to eat. No meat was on the glass-topped table, but there was a liberal supply of congealed carbohydrate and a large flagon of sterile distilled water. The dress of the household was uniform in type, no distinction being made between the sexes, but the married were to be distinguished from the unmarried by means of a yellow patch stamped with the Government arms, two broad arrows rampant.

Glancing round the healthy table, Smith inquired with a smile, "All well?" and to this salutation each in turn replied, "All correct."

"I know someone who isn't well," said Henry.

"Indeed?" asked his father.

"Yes, 58 Pancras—old Jones, you know—was taken off yesterday; his family haven't had a report yet."

For a moment there was silence. "Come, come," said Smith, hurriedly, "we must keep cheerful"; and he hastened to open a Government envelope.

Having read the contents, he turned to his son in righteous indignation—"Henry, I am pained to learn from this letter, sent by the Ministry of Eugenics, that you have been holding conversations with a girl in the next street without sanction of the Ministry; and, worse than that, there's a statement from the Secret Search Commission that a copy of Shakespeare's Sonnets was found hidden under your bed. You know very well, sir, that all poetry is on the State Index Expurgatorius, and that possession of any love poetry is a felony."

"Poetry!" exclaimed Mrs. Smith, shuddering.

"The whole thing is a very grave and serious reflection on me," added his father.

"Well, that's got nothing to do with me as a Unit," replied Henry.

"It has, indeed, sir, as you'll soon find out. My defense is clear. Only last Rest Day I read aloud the Laws and Appendices of the Ministry of Eugenics, whereby such actions are proscribed."

"I'm very sorry, Smith," said his son, "but I wanted to know how they managed in ancient days when a Unit chose his own comrade —sweethearts I think they called them."

"Great State!" moaned Mrs. Smith.

"Well, well, Mrs. Smith," said Smith wearily, "boys will be boys."

"Cease," shouted Mrs. Smith, "don't 'Mrs. Smith' me. I'm H/99a Hampstead, and boys are not boys, nor are girls. They're undeveloped Units with insane delusions—the vestigial taint of Christian times. My poor dear mother at least taught me the Acts of Parliament," and she sobbed bitterly.

"But," protested Smith, "both our children were at the State Asylum and released cured. Surely this conversation is treason?"

"Both these children were let out of the Asylum too soon, and if they follow H/99 they'll end in the Lethal Institute before their time."

"The State forbid," murmured Smith.

At that moment the door opened and a keen hatchet-faced man entered: "Act 43, Section XI. Right of Entry at all hours to Inspector of Cheerfulness. All cheerful, I hope?"

"Yes, sir," said Smith, rising with the others; "all cheerful; very cheerful, indeed, sir."

As he produced his red notebook the Inspector rapidly scrutinized each member of the family in turn.

"No, not all cheerful," he said. "You, for one, are not cheerful, H/99 Hampstead; but that's now beyond my Department. And what's the name of this Unit? He's got a curious expression on his face."

"That's Henry, sir."

"How long has he been looking like that?"

"Looking like what, sir?"

"Looking like that."

"I don't know, sir."

"You don't know!" said the Inspector, and he crossed the room to the telephone. "Hullo! I want Mental Emergencies. . . . Is that you, Mental. . . . This is Inspector Weevil. I'm speaking from H/99 Hampstead. There's a case of Suppressed Complex here. . . . No, it's not been notified. . . . Very good, send out a Psycho-Analyst at once. Right you are."

"Now, then," said the Inspector, more cheerfully, turning to the family, "what's the name and number of this girl?"

"Jane, sir," answered Smith, "born 17 years ago, vaccinated five times, inoculated thrice, hypnotized once, State Asylum . . . all the papers are in order. H/99/a/½ is her number."

"She will be in this house at 23 o'clock, when the Special Woman Inspector for young Female Units will call."

"Very good, sir," said Smith.

"I won't," exclaimed Jane, looking at her brother.

"Oh," sobbed Mrs. Smith, "this is awful! . . . 'won't.'"

"Keep silent," said the Inspector. "That child is a Christian."

"No, no, she's not, sir," groaned Smith.

"She is. And instead of contradicting, let's see your dictaphone records. That'll show how you've been getting along in this happy home."

Smith dragged out a large cabinet from beneath the table, and this the Inspector unlocked with his key.

"What's this here?" he exclaimed. "There's been a quarrel in this house. That's what it is. The record shows high voices, and curious expressions, eh? How about it?"

"We all deplore it, sir; we all deplore it," said Smith earnestly.

"I dare say you do," replied the Inspector, "and I'll tell you what it is, H/99. It's a good thing for you that you didn't live at a time when what they called money was used; because, what with fines for one thing and another, you'd have had nothing left. That's to say, if we inspectors were to do our duty. . . . Well, now, I must be getting along."

Amongst his far-off ancestors were some who had followed the calling of a policeman, and as he left the house a small packet of

carbohydrate was pressed into his hand by Smith. But, so preoccupied was the Inspector, he made no outward acknowledgment of the gift.

The hours passed and various officials called. An Investigator of Chimney-piece Ornaments and the Agent for the Society of Hygienic Wallpapers (with Powers under the Act) were early arrivals. The Special Woman Inspector insisted on cropping Jane's hair, and Henry had a long and painful interview with the Psycho-Analyst. One Searcher found a blanket that was not all wool, whilst another detected a couple of weeds in the little six-foot garden; but as these were minor offenses it was not altogether a bad morning for H/99. Moreover, it was nearing noon, when Smith would be free to go to his four hours' work a day, and during these hours he bred ferrets for the experiments of professors at the State Pandemonium.

As Smith was about to leave the house a closed motor-car stopped at the gate and a large fat man stepped out. This personage came up the steps and, taking Smith's arm, led him in a friendly fashion into the breakfast-room. The fat man then closed the door and smiled.

"All correct," said Smith, feeling somewhat uneasy; "perhaps you are the Inspector of—of Inspectors?"

"No, no, not so bad as that. I'm a Commissioner. We don't leave everything to the inspectors, you know. Now Smith, my friend, you're not happy."

"Oh, yes, indeed I am, sir, very happy."

"Well, well; we can have a chat about that on the way. I'm going to take you for a little drive."

The Commissioner opened the door and led Smith towards the closed car. As they went down the steps Smith's heart was thumping against his ribs. This physical emotion was utterly unreasonable, because the big man had been quite civil, and was neither pulling nor pushing him. Indeed, it seemed to Smith as if the Commissioner was merely pawing him gently; and yet in his cerebral cortex, owing doubtless to some vestigial taint from primordial times, the molecules were in a state of senseless panic.

Once seated in the well-cushioned car gliding out of Hampstead,

Smith swallowed a lump that was rising in his throat, and turned to the Commissioner sitting beside him. "I just wish to say, sir, that I'm very sorry indeed if I've been unhappy."

"No need to apologize, my dear fellow; in any case it wasn't your fault."

"Thank you very much, sir."

"Not at all. As you know, or ought to know, a Unit is never responsible for anything, and there's no need for you to blame yourself over this or over anything else. If there's any question of laxity the State alone is responsible. Possibly in the past our inspection has been less efficient than it might have been. At any rate, things are now being improved, as the State itself is threatened."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir," remarked Smith more cheerfully. "I mean I'm glad we'll be better inspected, but I'm sorry the State's in danger."

"That's just it," said the Commissioner; "the State is in great danger. This is not known to the Units, and the information I give you is secret."

"Thank you, sir, you may rely on my . . ."

"Of course I can. If there had been the slightest risk of your passing the news on, I wouldn't have told you. The danger is from Ireland. That island remained Christian, and is still inhabited by madmen obsessed with a delusion, in itself a fable borrowed from pagan mythology. For a hundred years we've forbidden any communication with these people, but from secret sources we know what they're doing. At present there's a Unit in the island who calls himself King George XX. He and his people have now decided that it's their duty to destroy this great State of which you and I are humble Units."

"But surely it's none of their business, sir," asked Smith, a trifle eagerly.

"Of course it's not their business, but they threaten a crusade, and that's where you come in, Smith—or, rather, that's where you go out."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I'm afraid that I don't quite follow your meaning, sir."

The Commissioner proceeded to explain.

"Well, my dear fellow, if these madmen make a war, don't you

see that it would be dangerous if we had within the State emotional Units who might sympathize with the enemy? Now you, Smith, are undoubtedly an emotional Unit."

"I'd never sympathize with the enemy, sir."

"Ah, one never knows, although it passes comprehension why anyone should sympathize with these madmen. If the Christians conquer, there will be a terrible upheaval and relapse. We'll no longer be housed, clothed, and fed by the State. Our hours of work won't be limited to four a day. Make no mistake about that. You wouldn't be told what you must do, but merely what you must not do. A most pernicious philosophy. And, worse than that, they'd restore tears and laughter to the world. Do you know, Smith, I often think that whenever a Unit feels inclined to belittle the work of our excellent inspectorate he should quietly recollect how fortunate we really are and how very different things might be. We might have been a tax-ridden people, harried and hounded by tax-collectors."

"The State forbid," said Smith, piously raising his hat. "I swear it."

"No need to swear," corrected the Commissioner gently. "In any case there's nothing to swear by, and no fear of treason on your part. But apart from these polemics, you're not really happy, Smith."

"Indeed I am, sir, very happy. I'm well inspected, and then I've got my ferrets. They're very fond of me, sir."

"Nonsense, my friend. In the first place, they're not your ferrets, because they belong to the State, and secondly, although they enjoy their food, I am quite sure that they are not so lacking in intelligence as to harbor any emotion towards the Unit whose duty it is to look after them. No, no, Smith, your face betrays you. You're not happy. Too much emotion. And your children prove it. The State permitted you to have two children. Well? Have you bred Samurai? I think not. The fact is you're degenerate, and we cannot encourage this to go on. Your own common sense must tell you that we can't afford to keep you. The Happier Homes idea has been given up. Too expensive and sentimental—almost Christian, in fact. Efficiency, H/99, efficiency, and all for the State. That's the motto of every loyal Unit."

"Where are we going, sir?" asked Smith, white in the face.

"To the Lethal Institute, my friend."

"No, no, I'm not," muttered Smith. "What Act of Parliament lets you do this? I've a right to know that. I'm a free Unit."

"The State has gone into your case. The Inspectors and the Secret Service have worked conscientiously over you. We have all the documents. Everything is in perfect order."

Smith glanced wildly round the car until his gaze was fixed on a long aluminum box placed across the front seats. "What's that thing?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Steady, my friend, you really must pull yourself together. That is . . . ahem . . . well . . . shall we say? . . . the hearse portion. Quite new, a labor-saving device."

"So I'm driving with my own coffin?"

"Well, in a sense I suppose you are, if you wish to put it that way. Personally I dislike the use of the word 'coffin,' on account of its ancient associations, and I usually refer to the thing as the 'container.' "

"Driving like a criminal to Tyburn!"

"Now, there you are quite wrong," replied the Commissioner gently. "There is no parallel. In the old days to which you refer the criminal was chained. There are no criminals now. You're not a criminal and you're not in chains. You are a free Unit who is about to submit to the requirements of the State."

"That's a lie," sobbed Smith. "The criminal was chained because he had a chance to escape, one in a million though it was. I've no chance at all. That's why you don't chain me!"

"Come, come, H/99, no temper, if you please. Be reasonable. Your own common sense must tell you that you're a greater danger than many criminals. But why all this fuss? There's nothing to hurt you. We have the highest medical opinion that it is quite painless. I can assure you as to that. And what is the whole affair, after all? A mere rearrangement of the molecules. . . . Ah, these molecules, Smith —if we could only get down to *them* we should move much more quickly. . . . That's all there is to it.

"And if you fear anything else, this in itself is further proof that you're not fit to live. Now, as an old hand at the business, my advice to you, Smith, is this—don't worry. No one is going to hurt

you. In a few minutes we shall be at the Institute; afterwards I shall take you on to the Crematorium, and within an hour at most your molecules will be floating in the blue Empyrean—back with the nitrogen from whence they came. A beautiful thought, my friend. . . . What! the man has fainted. . . . I must speak to that Inspector. We ought to have taken this Unit away twenty years ago. . . . Perhaps the whole family would be better away. I really must press the Board for a decision."

Suddenly Smith groaned.

"Ah, that's right," said the Commissioner. "Coming to, I see. You'll soon be all right."

"I don't want to be all right," moaned Smith.

"Nonsense, man. Nothing will happen to you without your full consent. Wait until you've seen the Sympathizers."

II

The car stopped at the door of the Institute. The Commissioner got out, and Smith followed. As they went up the steps their bodies broke an invisible ray, and two great doors slid open, revealing a gilded hall, lit by fairy-lights, and in the center a splashing fountain in which the falling water was colored like a rainbow. Behind the open doors stood a flunky dressed in cloth of gold and silver. He bowed low to Smith and said, "Welcome."

"In you go," said the Commissioner. "I'll see you later."

As in a dream, Smith entered, and the great doors closed behind him with a faint click. The flunky was smiling, and Smith, who had never before seen anyone except in rational dress, asked nervously, "Are you the Sympathizer, sir?"

"No, no, sir," said the flunky, "I'm only the doorkeeper. The Sympathizers are all in the salon, and you may choose any of the lot, male or female. This way, sir," and he led Smith to the curtained entrance of the salon, which opened out of the hall on the right as you entered.

Drawing aside the curtain so that Smith might enter, he announced at the top of his voice: "My lords, ladies, and gentlemen, pray silence for the entry of your guest, Mr. Smith, of Hampstead."

As he entered all the Sympathizers gave him a friendly smile, and Smith gasped for breath. He would have fainted again had not a middle-aged man, with large blue eyes that beamed through gold-rimmed spectacles, sprung forward and led him to an easy chair.

"Sit down, my friend," he greeted him, "I know it must seem rather strange to you. Now you have a good look round, take your time, and choose whom you will."

His new friend was dressed in a well-cut blue lounge suit. He was a trifle stout, and had the kindliest, jolliest face that Smith had ever seen.

"Sympathizer Kind is my name," he said, "if you should decide eventually to trust yourself to me; but take your time. Each to his taste," and, with another smile, he returned to the center of the room.

Smith leaned back in the well-upholstered chair, and stared at the Sympathizers in amazement. Never before had he sat in such a comfortable chair, and never before had he seen men and women dressed and undressed in such a variety of fashions.

What these fashions were Smith for the most part did not know, and yet each had its own appeal. Among the men, had he only known, he could have recognized a footballer, a cricketer, a boxer, a golfer in plus fours, a naval officer, a guardsman, a priest, and a gigolo. One man was naked, as also was one woman, a very beautiful woman with long golden hair hanging down to her waist. Another woman was half-undressed, and at the sight of these last two Smith blushed, for he was wholly degenerate, and did not understand sex appeal in its scientific aspects.

Other women he might have recognized were the ballet dancer, the principal boy and girl, the belle of the ball, the nurse, the tennis girl with racket complete, the yachting girl and a nun. Each in turn smiled at Smith, but being of a retiring disposition, he just sat and stared, until by a lull in their conversation he realized they were beginning to be bored by his presence.

So he beckoned to Sympathizer Kind, who at once joined him with the remark: "You have chosen well, my friend."

The others clapped their hands in a well-bred manner and said: "See you later, Mr. Smith."

Sympathizer Kind led Mr. Smith across the gaily-lighted hall.

"Can't very well have a heart-to-heart chat in there, old man," he smiled.

Across the hall, they entered another room through a door which closed behind them with a click. In the center of the room was a circular steel table and two hygienic chairs of glass and chromium, one on either side of the table. The walls were white, devoid of pictures, and against one wall were two steel cupboards painted white. It was a square room measuring twenty feet, and in the center of the roof was the gauze of a loudspeaker.

"Makes you feel quite at home," his new friend said with a smile, as he beckoned Smith to take the chair farthest from the door.

"Yes, sir," said Smith, with a gulp in his throat.

"Now," said the Sympathizer, "just you tell me all about it, and we'll see what can be done."

At that Smith poured out his troubles. The Sympathizer listened attentively, only occasionally asking a question to clear up some point about which he was not quite certain. When Smith's story came to an end, the Sympathizer looked grave, and Smith's heart sank.

"This looks very serious," said the Sympathizer thoughtfully, and then added, "I think the Commissioner has made a most serious error in judgment."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, sir. Then you will help me to escape?"

"Of course I'll help you, but we must consider ways and means. Now let me think for a minute or two."

The Sympathizer bent across the table and covered his face with his hand for a couple of minutes before he spoke.

"Do you realize, Smith, that to save you I must tell you everything about this place?" he said at last.

"Yes, sir," said Smith eagerly.

"Well, now, do you know that no male or female Unit who enters the front door of this Institute ever leaves by the way they entered?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. They all leave by the back doors—dead. Except one or two, of whom you'll be one, who reach the back door at the end of the Lethal Tunnel—alive. Naturally, you want to know how the one or two escape?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll tell you," said the Sympathizer and pulled open a steel drawer in the table in front of his chair, from which he produced a gas-mask. This he patted gently.

"That's my own special gas-mask," he explained. "Now, when I don't want a Unit to escape I put it on, and tell the Unit that I'm going to give him or her—because, curiously enough, some female units select me—ha, ha!—a duplicate mask. Then I open that steel cupboard nearest to you and take out a mask the very duplicate of my own. Of course it's a dud, and when we reach the gas it doesn't work. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Smith dubiously, because the problem was complicated.

"Don't pretend, Smith! You still have doubts. Ha, ha! Well, any mistrust may be set at rest, because I am going to give you my own special gas-mask." And with that the Sympathizer placed his gas-mask by Smith's right hand on the table.

"Thank you, sir, but—are you not coming down the—the—Tunnel with me?"

"Of course I am, but I'm going to have a gas-mask like you. Only I don't take my mask from the first cupboard—no fear—but from the second, where the masks are as genuine as the one I gave you." The Sympathizer opened the cupboard nearest the door, removed a mask and placed it on the table near his chair. "Now I must tell you about the Tunnel, and what to expect at the other—"

A gong sounded, and from the loudspeaker in the ceiling came the words, "Sympathizer Kind, if he can spare a moment, is urgently wanted in Antechamber Five."

The Sympathizer frowned the first frown Smith had seen on his face. "Excuse me a moment, Friend Smith, I won't be long. I wonder what it is?"

He gave a low whistle, the door opened, and closed behind him.

Left alone in the soundproof room, Smith smiled. What a really decent fellow the Sympathizer was. To give his own gas-mask to a total stranger and choose a new one for himself. No, he had better change the masks. At the Pandemonium, Smith had learnt all the

dangers of respiratory infections. Perhaps Sympathizer Kind liked his mask so much that he never troubled to have it sterilized. Germs innocuous to Kind might not be so innocuous to Smith. That much of bacteriology he had learnt at the Pandemonium.

He changed the masks, but decided it would never do to tell Sympathizer Kind of his views about sterilizing gas-masks.

Suddenly the door opened, and Sympathizer Kind, looking a little flushed, entered, glanced anxiously at the table, smiled and said, "Well, here we are again. You'll wonder why I was called away? In the salon, did you notice Sympathizer Eve—the female in the altogether, I mean without any clothes?"

"Yes, sir," said Smith eagerly.

"Well, I was just called to Antechamber Five to explain to a Unit that his attempted love-making was a little premature, although at the end of the Tunnel he may do what he likes with Sympathizer Eve. But—let me see—I was telling you about the Tunnel. Yet why waste time? On with our masks! The sooner we're in, the sooner we're out. Ask me any questions on the way, Friend Smith."

"Yes, sir," said Smith, as each adjusted his gas-mask, "but where's the Tunnel?"

"There," answered the Sympathizer, and, as he pressed a button, the whole of the back steel wall of the room rose, revealing a square tunnel with beautiful scenery painted on either wall and a skyscape on the roof, all brilliantly lit by artificial daylight. On the floor of the square tunnel was a low-placed trolley, running, as the Sympathizer explained, not on wheels but on long interrupted plates of magnetic steel. Two large hygienic chairs were screwed to the trolley.

"Take your pew, Smith; they're both the same," and so Smith sat in one and Sympathizer Kind in the other.

"Just put your arms along the arms of the chair, and legs against the front legs, and I'll do the same."

Smith followed the Sympathizer's instructions.

"Now," said the Sympathizer, "I'm going to press a button with my left foot."

Smith watched, and in a moment he was pinioned to the chair by semicircular steel clamps round his arms and legs.

Smith shrieked.

"Don't be a fool," shouted the Sympathizer. "Can't you see I'm clamped as much as you?"

Smith looked, and saw his Sympathizer was also clamped by steel bands.

"I'm very sorry, sir."

"That's all right. Now start her off. Under your right foot you'll feel a knob—unless you've got an extra thick sole on your boot, which no ordinary Unit is supposed to have."

"No, sir, I haven't, and I can feel the knob."

"Then press it."

"What happens then, sir?"

"The steel wall is lowered behind us and off we go."

"No, sir, I don't like to do it."

"Then I must push the control myself, but I'm bound to say, Smith, you don't seem to have much confidence in your Sympathizer."

Smith felt the knob beneath his right foot sink. The steel wall was slowly lowered behind them, and the trolley was moving along the Tunnel at the rate of three miles an hour.

"I'm sorry I mistrusted you, sir."

"That's all right, Smith. Perhaps I was a bit rattled by the scene in Antechamber Five. Never mind about that. Look at the scenery you're seeing."

Smith looked on the painted panoramas to right and left.

"Oh, Kind, I've never seen anything so beautiful as that," he exclaimed.

"Dare say you haven't. *I've* never seen the reality, nor am I likely to see it."

"What is it?"

"It's Loch Awe, where Our Totality lives."

"What's Our Totality, Sympathizer Kind?"

"Oh, of course, you've never heard of Our Totality. Mind you, I've never seen him, but I know what he is. How shall I put it to a Unit like you? You know your Commissioner? Yes. Well, he's got more brains than you or me."

"Of course, Sympathizer."

"Well, Our Totality has exactly one thousand times more brains than any commissioner. That's why he and he alone lives there, on

that island we're passing now. Now do you understand?"

"No, not quite, Sympathizer."

"Well, all I can say is that you really make me tired. Anyway, I'm a bit rattled about what happened in Antechamber Five, and I put it all on you."

"Please don't, Sympathizer. Whatever happened had nothing to do with me, and you promised to tell me what happens when we both arrive at the end of the Tunnel."

"What are you afraid of?"

"That you're angry, Sympathizer, and what the Commissioner will do when he sees me alive at the end of the Tunnel."

"The Commissioner will never see you alive at the end of the Tunnel—don't shriek, you fool—it's not the time for shrieking. At the end of the Tunnel are only four deaf-mutes ready to put you into your Container."

"The Container," shouted Smith, "you promised to tell me about the Container."

"So I did, and I will, if you'll only keep calm. Should have told you before, but the disgraceful scene in Antechamber Five ruffled me. Perhaps you'll have a little sympathy for me when I tell you that Sympathizer Eve is my comrade."

"Oh, yes, I have, sir, but about the Container?"

"What about it! No one's going to put you in a Container. Didn't I give you my own gas-mask? Of course I did. Well—oh, damn Eve—when our trolley hits the buffers in the open air at the other end, the clamps are automatically released, and you and I walk away. Where do we walk? You've as many questions to ask as a child, and I've had plenty of experience of them. Why, you fool, we just walk out through a little steel gate in the fifty-foot wall on our left. It opens from the inside only. There's no handle on the outside. Now are you satisfied?"

"What about the deaf-mutes, sir? Won't they be a little surprised?"

"They'll just think you're a new Sympathizer having a trial trip with me."

"But what about the Commissioner?"

"Oh, damn the Commissioner! What about him?"

"Be careful, Sympathizer!"

"That's all right. In the Tunnel no one can overhear what we're saying. It's the only place where they can't—but what about the Commissioner?"

"Well, won't he be angry when he finds I'm—I'm—still here?"

"Look here, Smith, you make me really tired with your chatter. Plaguing the man who's saving your life. I'll tell the Commissioner you are a superman who held his breath for seven minutes in the gaseous zones and escaped. Now are you happy?"

"Yes, sir, but where am I going after we get out through the little steel gate in the high wall?"

"Hell, you're coming to live with me and Sympathizer Eve, because we both like you. Now are you content?"

"Most content, sir."

"Good—because in a minute or so we go uphill into the forest of larches—the sweet gas zone through which we pass for two minutes. Then downhill for five minutes into the valley of grey gas. Some units when they enter the sweet gas try to hold their breath. No one can hold his breath for more than two minutes. All the worse if they do, because then they are conscious when they breathe the grey gas, which sears eyes, nostrils, mouth, and lungs for about thirty seconds before it finally stops the clock. Not scared yet, Smith?"

"Just a little, sir."

"Why only a little?"

"Because we've both got real gas-masks."

"You fool! If ever a Unit deserved the blue Empyrean, as that accursed Commissioner calls it—you're the man. Why should I risk my life to help a useless Unit like you to escape? The mask I gave you was a dud. Mine's the only real gas protector in this tunnel!"

III

Smith screamed, and then was silent in thought.

What had he said to the Commissioner?—one chance in a million at Tyburn. It was now an even chance, and perhaps, his heart beat wildly, a certainty. If not, he would be glad to die and to get away from people like Sympathizer Kind.

"Have you fainted, Smith?" asked Kind.

"No, I've not," was the unexpectedly calm reply.

"What do you mean? I begin to admire you. Well, now we're going uphill. Take deep breaths, Smith. It's all for the—Hell, you fiend, you've changed the masks—oh! I'll hold my breath, I. . . ."

Smith sat shivering as the trolley rose through a mound of painted larches in the Tunnel. He was breathing quietly, and smelled nothing. Such was his degeneration that he felt pity for Sympathizer Kind. The trolley began to go downhill into a grey mist. Then came the sound of forced expiration, followed by an inspiratory shriek, and the trolley shook with convulsive movements for a second or so. Smith looked at his companion. Sympathizer Kind was limp, and the engorged veins on his bald head were black.

Slowly—or, to be precise, at the rate of three miles per hour—the trolley ascended out of the Valley of Grey Gas and continued on the level. At the end of a long vista Smith saw a small square of daylight, and gradually this square of daylight became larger and larger. As the trolley approached the exit Smith's heart was once more thumping. Would the Commissioner be there?

The Commissioner was not there. Twenty yards beyond the end of the Tunnel the interrupted plates of magnetic steel stopped at a buffer. Behind the buffer stood four little men, and by their side lay the Container. The trolley met the buffer, the clamps sprang apart, the body of Sympathizer Kind fell sideways on the asphalt, and Smith stepped out of his hygienic chair.

Without a glance at Smith, the four deaf-mutes placed the body of the late Sympathizer Kind in the Container, clamped on the lid, and carried it round a corner of the Institute. To his left Smith saw the great wall with the little steel door. He tore off his gas-mask, put it in his pocket, and next moment was walking like a free Unit in the street.

Within an hour Smith had re-entered the breakfast-room at H/99 Hampstead, where Mrs. Smith was solemnly reading aloud to Jane and Henry the Act of Parliament concerning those who die for the State.

As soon as she saw her comrade Mrs. Smith screamed.

"Oh, I thought you were dead!" she gasped. "We had the official news on the radio an hour ago. The Commissioner himself spoke to all Hampstead: 'Comrade Smith, H/99 Hampstead, has left the Lethal Institute, where his last words were, "I hail the blue Empyrean, and may less worthy Units follow my lead." ' It sounded lovely. And now, in spite of everything, you're back."

"So that's what he said, is it? Well, Mrs. Smith, I can tell you it was a lie."

"Oh, you'll be the death of me, and the death of us all."

"Not glad to see me back—is that what it is?"

"No, it isn't," sobbed Mrs. Smith, "but I did think you were dead. My poor mother, whom you always despised, told me how to respect the dead. I don't need to know—know—know—Acts of Parliament to do—do—do—that," and with this final outburst Smith's comrade wept bitter tears and became hysterical.

Scenes such as these are not good for children. Henry sat, his elbow on the table, his cheek resting on his hand, and a frown on his face. To do the lad justice, he was thinking of his Shakespeare's Sonnets (confiscated under Secret Search Commission Index Expurgatorius, Article V, Section One, Clause A). Jane had no such thoughts. She rushed to Smith, threw her arms round his neck, and shouted, "Daddy, I'm glad you're back, and your ferrets will be glad, too."

The sound of a Chinese gong on the loudspeaker put an end to a scene which was likely to degenerate into sheer bathos.

"Commissioner speaking to H/99 Hampstead," came a voice. "Most Secret and Confidential. Under pain of instant death, no member of Smith family to leave their home tonight. No communion with neighbors. Your house now surrounded by members of the Poisoned Darts Deaf-Mute Brigade. Anyone who attempts to leave dies *instanter,* without benefit of Act of Parliament. Entire family to parade in breakfast-room at 4 A.M. tomorrow, without carbohydrates or water. At that hour, I, the Commissioner for all Hampstead, acting by and/or through the authority of Our Totality, will decide whether the sentence on all now present will be death or exile. Now each and all to his or her bed. There shall be no talking in bed. Every pillow is overheard. Tomorrow, all depends on Smith speaking

the truth. Now, to your beds without a word, or at your peril. Amen."

At 4 A.M. next day the family of H/99 Hampstead stood at attention round their breakfast-table, having eaten no breakfast. At one minute past four, because even Commissioners may be late, a great car slowed down and stopped outside their gate. Within a minute, the Commissioner was in the breakfast-room, where they stood waiting.

"Sit down, everyone," he ordered, and all the Smiths sat down.

"Now find a chair for me," said the Commissioner.

Smith sprang to his feet—"Please take mine, sir. There's not another in the house."

"Sit down, Smith. No other chair! That's to your credit. You obey the Law of No Hospitality. Some don't. Sit down, I will stand. All your lives are in my hand, or rather in the hand of Smith, the head of this benighted family. He shall answer one question. Stop! Is that radio on or off?"

"I don't know, sir. We're not allowed to interfere with it."

"Quite right, my friend. Stand up."

The Commissioner seized the empty chair and smashed the wireless.

"Now, Smith, I can ask, and you can answer in the presence of your family, a simple question on which, because I'm always fair, your life and the lives of those about you depend. The question is—Did Sympathizer Kind make a mistake, or did you change the gas-masks? Answer within four seconds, please, the psychological limit."

"I changed the masks, sir."

"Good! You said it within two seconds and therefore it's true. Now, Smith, you and yours are to be exiled."

"No, sir, we'd rather not."

"You fool, you don't know what you're talking about. When we find that a Unit, his comrade, and offspring are unfit, we destroy them. Yet when, as in your case, unfitness is allied to cunning, we deport or exile them to Ireland, in the hope that they and their progeny may flourish in Ireland, and so breed degeneracy among our enemies. Now, all of you get into the charabanc that's to take us to the aerodrome."

"Now, Smith, as we're on the way to the aerodrome you may tell me a thing or two. No physical force used at the Lethal? No. That's good. Any, any—well, shall we say mental torture applied in the Tunnel, so far as your experience goes?"

"Yes, sir, he was a fiend, although I was sorry for him there at the end."

"Never mind about your being sorry for him. The less you say about that sort of thing the better—until you and yours are safe in Ireland. Only a degenerate would waste sympathy—a forbidden emotion—on Sympathizer Kind. He was guilty of grave dereliction of duty. What do you think all that beautiful scenery is for?"

"I don't know, sir."

"To interest the Units on their way along the Tunnel. For the first and last time in his life the condemned Unit sees beauty. He thinks he's got a real gas-mask, and is interested all the way. In the Larch Forest he breathes the sweet gas, goes to sleep, and never wakes up. Could anything be more humane than that?"

"No, sir."

"Seems to me the Lethal needs a comb out. I'll send some of my best Agents-Provocateurs down this afternoon."

"They may get killed, sir."

"Not they. They never get hurt. When they go down the Tunnel with the Sympathizers there will be no gas on. I'll see to that. But I shall await the trolleys at the end of the tunnel, and if any mental cruelty be reported—what do you think I'll do?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Why, I'll stop the release of the clamps. Take the real gas-mask off the face of the Sympathizer in question, stick it on the face of the Agent-Provocateur, switch on the grey gas, and send the trolley backwards through the Tunnel. Well, here we are at the aerodrome. It's a fine day."

At the aerodrome an aeroplane was waiting on the center of the ground, and the car drove alongside. The pilot saluted the Commissioner, who showed him a card, which he read carefully and nodded.

"Deaf-mute," explained the Commissioner to Smith. "No temptations to lead him away from home."

Four groundsmen, also deaf-mutes, strapped parachutes on each

of the Smiths and then placed four ladders against the side of the 'plane.

"Up you go," said the Commissioner to Smith, "into Barrel No. 1, your comrade into Barrel 2, and the children into 3 and 4."

All obeyed, and Smith found himself standing in a large barrel with smooth sides, over the top of which he could not see.

"No," explained the Commissioner, before the groundsmen fitted on the lids, "there's no risk of suffocation. The lids are perforated with small holes, enough to let air in and out, but not large enough for fingers to get through for holding on. At a given destination the pilot will pull a lever, and one by one the bottoms will drop out of the barrels. After that each of you should say 'Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three,' which takes three seconds, before pulling the rip-cord. That means you're clear of the machine before the parachute opens. And by the way, Smith, these parachutes work all right. Not like certain dud masks of which you had a little experience yesterday."

The lids were fitted. Smith heard the ladders being removed, the engine splutter, then roar. In his closed barrel he felt the 'plane jolting, then the steadiness of the air. A great fear possessed him. What did the Commissioner mean by saying the parachutes were not like the dud masks? He said the parachutes worked. Did that mean they killed you? Were the parachutes real?

On these doubts his mind worked incessantly, until suddenly he and the bottom fell out of the barrel. A gale of wind struck his body and blew him backwards in the air. He forgot to count until he saw Mrs. Smith drop out of the 'plane, in front and some distance above him. Then, without counting, he pulled the cord.

In the corner of his left eye something white fluttered, and he closed his eyes. He was falling. Then came a wrench under his armpits, and he was swung vertically in the air. He looked up, and the great parachute was open. So also were three other parachutes. Soon he was steady in the air, for the day was calm. He looked down. The kindly earth was rising slowly to meet him. It was a country of lakes, green fields and hills—and oh, how green was the grass on those hills coming nearer and nearer!

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

★ The March issue opens with a long novelette by Henry Kuttner: THE EGO MACHINE. This ingenious bit of nonsense concerns the peculiar doings of a spineless writer, a tyrannical Balkan film director, and an amiable robot named ENIAC. The robot, who comes from the far future, has only the best motives: he wants to help the aforesaid writer adapt to his environment by giving him the dominant personality-matrix of his type, which happens to be Disraeli's. But the best motives, applied in this situation, turn out to be very much like the best butter, applied in the Mad Hatter's watch. . . .

★ Lester del Rey contributes FAREWELL TO EARTH—a study in the emotions of a man who stows away on the first spaceship, confidently expecting to arrive on Mars—and finds himself headed out to the chilling immensities of interstellar space.

★ Peter Phillips, a welcome addition to our growing roster of British writers, is present with C/O MR. MAKEPEACE: a rather horrid little tale about a gentleman who is quietly driven to madness by a lodger who isn't there. . . .

★ We can't promise what the rest of the lineup will be, since the Kuttner story takes up more room than usual; but there are stories on hand by Jack Vance, Arthur C. Clarke, E. R. Morrough, John Keir Cross, John Christopher and Richard Matheson.

★ The April issue, by the way, features a highly unusual story by James Blish. Just for a beginning, it involves a wooden spaceship, filled with water, moved by muscle-power, and traveling on dry land!

—THE EDITOR

Continued from inside front cover

Walter C. Davies wrote *Forgotten Tongue* in 1941, just nine years before Dianetics introduced engrams to an astonished world. The story is republished in these pages only partly because it is amusing and witty; the other reason is to add another proof that there is nothing new under the sun.

Richard Matheson tells us, "I was born of man and woman in the month February of 1926. In New Jersey. In a house. My parents were exiled to Brooklyn when I had just begun to acquire the knack of dripping green. In this happy environment I spent my youth attending many public schools and one technical high school where I learned to hate science. This later proved helpful in writing science-fiction.

"After working in a defense plant for a time, I enlisted in the Army hoping to become a second lieutenant. Later I found out what I had missed by not becoming a second lieutenant. I am still very grateful.

"My hobbies are song writing, swimming, reading rejection slips and sending unpublished letters to editors. I am not and never have been a member of the Communist Party. I vote the straight Vegetarian ticket and love small dogs and cats. And my seven nieces and one nephew.

"I wrote my first story when I was seven. Anti-war legislation willing, I shall write my last at about ninety-six."

Harry Harrison is a commercial artist whose interest in science-fantasy has until recently been entirely unselfish. He speaks fluent Esperanto and fair English, and is a mainstay of the Hydra Club in New York.

Halliday Sutherland, born 24th June 1882, studied medicine at Edinburgh University, and graduated M.D., with honors, in 1908. He is a past president of the Tuberculosis Society of Great Britain.

His autobiography, "Arches of the Years," published in 1932, is now in its 35th English edition, and has been translated into seven European languages.